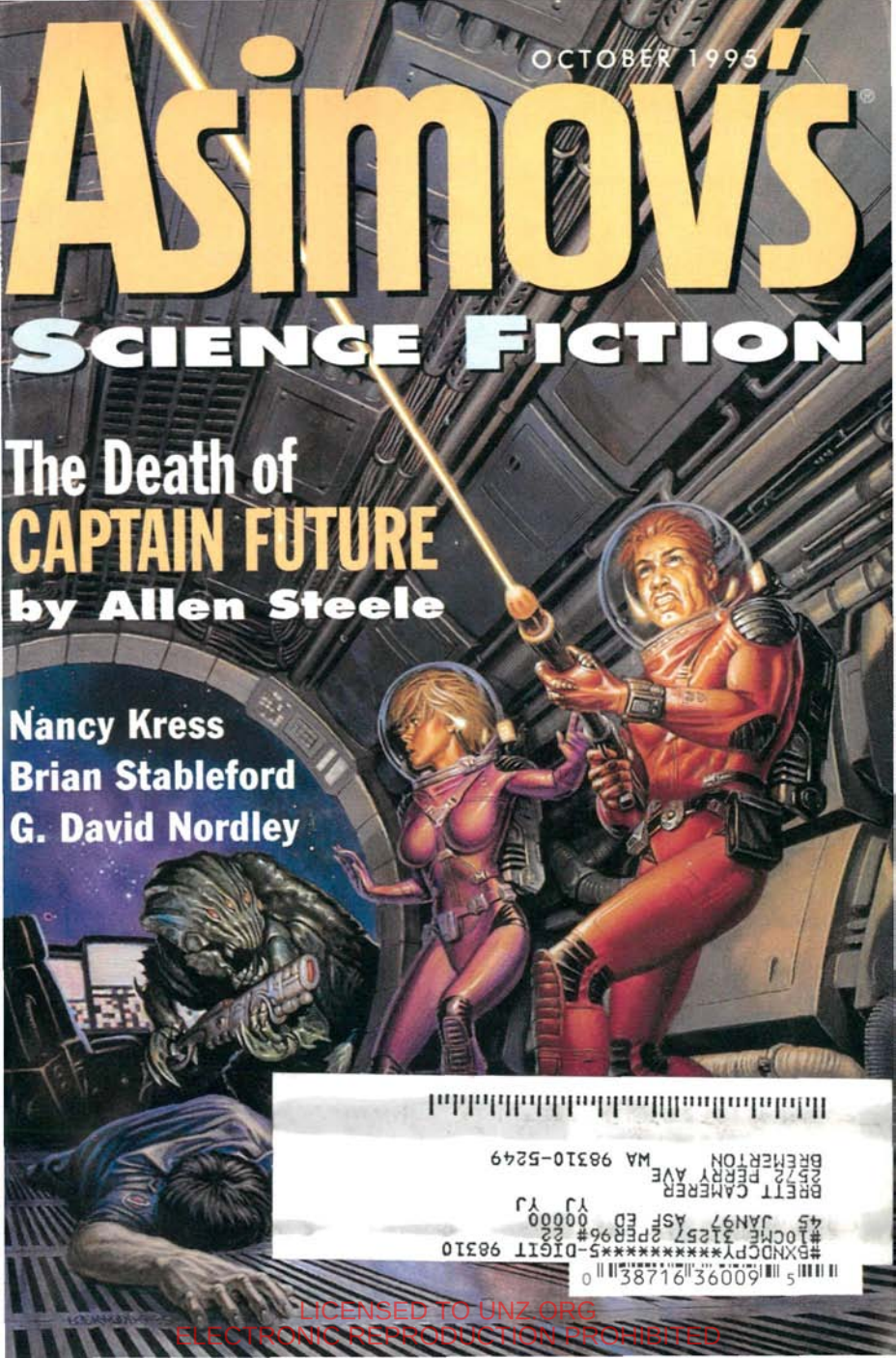

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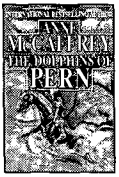

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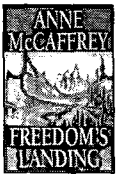

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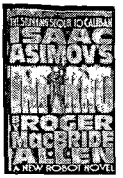

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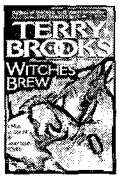

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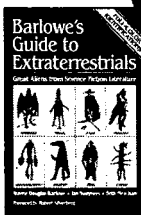

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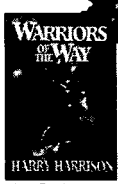

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Asimov's
SCIENCE FICTION

Vol.19 No. 11 (Whole Number 236) October 1995
Next Issue on Sale September 12, 1995

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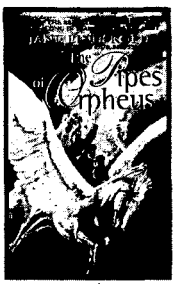

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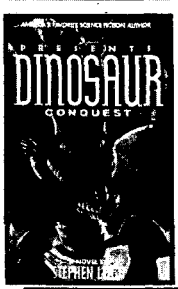

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

THE AUDIENCE GROWS OLDER

Our esteemed colleagues over at *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* ran a survey of their readership a couple of years ago to gather demographic information for potential advertisers. Editor Kristine Kathryn Rusch, reporting on the results in last February's *F&SF*, found the news "disturbing." The readership of her magazine, she said, is getting older: "The bulk of the readers," she said, "fall in the twenty-six to fifty-five year age group. Only 2 percent of our readers are under the age of eighteen. Only 5 percent are between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. . . . Fifty-five percent of our readers are over thirty-five." A similar survey in the SF trade journal *Locus* produced similar data. Doubtless the survey mavens in the advertising department of *Asimov's Science Fiction* have turned up the same information. "The fact that s-f is losing its young readers is a problem for the genre," Kris Rusch wrote. "It is also curious, given the rise in popularity of s-f films, games, and video games."

Even if the *F&SF* survey's findings are somewhat skewed because only the older readers bothered to reply to it—something that I suspect from the fact that 48 percent of the respondents said they had been reading the magazine eleven years or longer, leading me to think that a lot of newer and perhaps less dedicated readers ignored the survey—there seems no doubt that the audience for the kind of science fiction that magazines like *Asimov's* and *F&SF* publish is failing to replace itself, and the same is true of the audience for the books that once were regarded as the defining center of the field—the straightforward non-media-connected books that are our classics, the novels by such people as Heinlein, Asimov, Sturgeon, Blish, Simak, Herbert, Bester, Dick, etc., etc. Sales of these writers' books have begun distinctly to slide now that their authors are no longer producing new work, and in many cases they have vanished from print altogether.

I have seen the aging-audience effect myself, most vividly, whenever I do a book signing at a science-fiction convention. I get a gratifyingly long line of people who want my autograph, yes—but most of them are in the thirty-five-to-forty-five-year-old range, readers who were hooked on my stuff fifteen or twenty years ago and now

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want me to sign their aging copies of *Dying Inside* or *Tower of Glass*. The younger members of the line, who seem to be in the twenty-five-to-thirty-year age-group, generally ask me to sign *Lord Valentine's Castle* or other books in my popular Majipoor series. And hardly anybody younger than twenty-five seems to be on the line at all, except those helping their fathers or mothers carry a stack of cherished old books for me to sign. My one-man demographic survey has me convinced that the Robert Silverberg audience is aging at a rate of one year per year, just like Silverberg himself. I'm keeping my loyal fans as they turn gray and weary, but I'm not getting a lot of new readers down at the younger end of the scale. And neither, as far as I can tell, is anybody else who works in the traditional modes of SF.

Kris Rusch puzzles over the fact that the readership for traditional SF isn't growing, "given the rise in popularity of s-f films, games, and video games." But I think that that is *precisely* the explanation for what's going on. The kids I see at the conventions crowd eagerly around the video games and the dealers who sell them *Star Trek* memorabilia and role-playing cards; Robert A. Heinlein himself could walk through their midst and they wouldn't have a clue to who was among them. What had been the periphery of the field is now its center, and we are at the periphery, an aging bunch of cultists full of nostalgia for the good old days of *Dune* and *Stranger*

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in a Strange Land. When the youngsters get tired of playing *Magic: The Gathering* or watching *Star Trek: Voyager,* they may buy a *Magic: The Gathering* anthology or a *Voyager* novelization, but it won't occur to them to pick up a magazine full of stories by people they've never heard of (Connie Willis, Kim Stanley Robinson, John Varley, Ursula K. Le Guin) telling stories dealing with situations *with which they are not already familiar.*

It's that element of *a priori* familiarity, the sense of returning to a place they already know, that modern SF magazines are lacking. As Gregory Benford trenchantly put it, commenting on the *F&SF* findings, "S-f became a huge media phenom through *shared experiences* of the future: *Star Trek,* then the continuing family-like adventures . . . of *Star Wars*. This taught a generation to seek the 'sci-fi' experience in this associative way, which isn't the root experience of reading books or magazines. So the media parade missed the written medium. The hoped-for transference of *Star Trek* book readers to mainline s-f didn't happen. . . .

"It suggests that the way to reach this enormous audience is to find a shared, quasi-communal vehicle. I wonder if this is even possible in magazines, though it might be in books."

But I remember—and Greg Benford probably does too—a time when the SF magazines provided younger readers with just that sort of quasi-communal reading experience and built-in ongoing familiarity. There was, in the 1940s, a pulp magazine called *Captain Future,* a kind of comic book in prose, featuring the lively adventures of a band of gallant spacegoers clearly ancestral to the heroes of *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*. The central figure was Curt Newton, "the red-haired young wizard of science known to all men as Captain Future," a "thinker and dreamer" of great dash and glamour who roared around the solar system righting wrongs and thwarting bad guys. His entourage included Simon Wright, the Brain, "a living human brain housed in a square, transparent case whose circulating serums kept him alive"; Grag, the robot, whose "mighty metal figure, bulbous metal head and gleaming photo-electric eyes made him an awe-inspiring figure"; and Otho, the android, whose "body was quite human in shape but was of rubbery white synthetic flesh."

Edmond Hamilton, the grand old pulpster who created the *Captain Future* epics, churned out fifty thousand words of prose like this in every issue:

" 'The conclusion is inescapable that Ul Quorn has some secret base at which he plans to build a giant spaceship. In that ship, fueled with radite, Quorn and his band will go into the co-existing universe in search of the mysterious treasure Haines told about.'

" 'Good reasoning, lad,' approved the Brain. 'I believe now we're getting somewhere.' "

The kids loved it. In the back of

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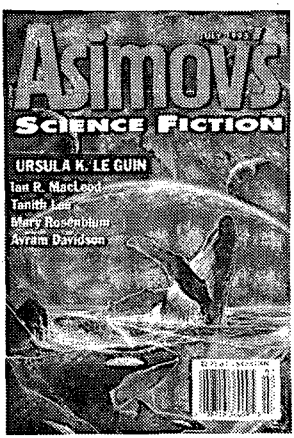

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each issue, meanwhile, there was room for a few non-Captain Future short stories. These—by such writers as Ray Bradbury, Henry Kuttner, and Jack Williamson—were generally of somewhat higher literary quality, so that more sophisticated readers might be tempted to pick up the magazine as well.

Then there were *Startling Stories* and *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, two garish-looking pulp magazines that in fact ran excellent SF by many of the best writers of the era. What provided the month-by-month corn-ball continuity was a letter column presided over by a character named Sergeant Saturn, who would introduce ten pages of letters from faithful readers with stuff like this:

"If it's red meat you want, and alive and on the hoof, then the old space dog is your mutton. If you'll just wait until I square off and have a go at knocking you junior astrogators into shape for the ensuing cruise. Take your stations now and look alive while we seal the exit ports and prepare to blast off. Okay. The all-clear signal is blinking. So we'll start spacing this voyage with a brief snort of the starboard rocket bank from a spot south of the Border." Which was the lead-in to a letter from Harry Tawil of Mexico City in the August 1943 *Thrilling Wonder*.

Puerile? Sure. Silly? Beyond a doubt. But the formula worked, just as it worked for another grand old pulp magazine, *Planet Stories*, the contents page of which was bedecked with stories with titles like "Lorelei of the Red Mist," "Prisoner of the Brain-Mistress," and "Captives of the Weir-Wind." You knew

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exactly what you were going to get when you put your twenty cents down for a copy of *Planet Stories*—rip-roaring space adventure—and the fact that the stories were by people like Ray Bradbury, Poul Anderson, Theodore Sturgeon, and (on one famous occasion) Isaac Asimov was no drawback to your innocent enjoyment of them, however highfalutin those writers might get when they wrote for other magazines.

And that is the point. At age thirteen or so, you were drawn in by *Captain Future Magazine* or the antics of Sarge Saturn or the comic-book-like gaudiness of *Planet Stories*; but if you stuck around a couple of years, you noticed that the same writers were appearing in the more austere magazines aimed for older readers, and you tried one of those out of curiosity and perhaps moved along to become a regular reader of them.

Nobody's publishing magazines for entry-level SF readers nowadays, and perhaps that's the problem. It's a big leap from the media-oriented stuff to the sort of fiction found in *Asimov's* and its contemporaries. That may be a big mistake. Maybe if there had been a magazine all along that ran a Han Solo/Luke Skywalker novella up front, or Kirk-Spock-McCoy stuff, and had stories by Bruce Sterling, Gregory Benford, Orson Scott Card, and Pat Cadigan in the back pages, just to provide new readers with a hint of the fact that there's more to science fiction than what they've already discovered, the demographic picture would look a lot brighter for today's adult-oriented SF magazines.

Is it too late? Can we catch that huge media-oriented readership young, and teach them the habit of getting their science fiction in the magazine format? Or will magazines like this one and *Fantasy & Science Fiction* continue to serve an ever-older, ever-smaller audience until the doddering Kris Rusch and the age-withered Gardner Dozois are carted off to the home for superannuated editors? I'd like to see someone make another stab at an entry-level SF magazine, heavily but not totally media-oriented, before we give up entirely on the concept of magazines as a viable medium for stimulating and challenging science fiction. ●

Due to serendipitous coincidence, we find ourselves with a Reflections column by Robert Silverberg, and an exotic novella by Allen Steele that make use of Edmond Hamilton's dashing hero, Captain Future. The further adventures of this romantic swashbuckler (so brilliantly recreated on our cover by Todd Lockwood) can be found on page 120.

— the editors

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LETTERS

Dear People:

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" on "Crime and Punishment" in the December issue of *Asimov's* was just excellent. It spoke eloquently to human nature and ethnocentrism. Being a fairly new fan of this magazine, I confess that I was surprised to find this type of writing in a science fiction publication and would very much like to use it in my Personal Growth classes in the College.

Ellen Stouffer
Teaching Professor,
Confederation College
Thunder Bay, Ont.
Canada.

Dear Mr. Dozois,

February issue of *Asimov's* received and read with mixed feelings. Nice Krauter cover, but a head shake over the inclusion of two stories. MacLeod's "Ellen O'Hara" and McHugh's "Joss" are well written but are they SF by any definition currently in use? I think not. Remove the mild telepathy in the former and the mag-lev train in the latter and you have two perfectly good mainstream stories (and, presumably, stories without a market!).

Michael Swanwick's "Walking Out" was nicely done, I didn't spot the key word "denial" till I re-read the story. Mary Rosenblum's "Flight" came over quite well too —it has a very Jack Vance feel to it. (Vance's stories always seem so ethereal that it was somewhat of a shock once to meet him and find that he is such a solid down-to-earth sort of individual.)

My two favorite stories in this issue came from Tom Purdom and Kandis Elliot. Purdom's "Research Project" packed a lot into its length and the framing device that could have been intrusive worked surprisingly well. Elliot's "Road Kills" was unusual in its subject matter—it could have been subtitled "The Midwich Cuckoos meet Bambi" —and gave us an interesting plot and characters (I also liked Elliot's illustration of the triplets and the cat—not many writers can illustrate their own stories).

Worthy of special mention is Robert Silverberg's column this month. He puts into words a vague feeling of dissatisfaction I've been feeling the last few years. For example, I was initially pleased at not one but two SF shops opening in Hobart last year, but found after a while that there didn't really seem to be much I wanted to buy in them. Silverbob's piece on "Gresham's Law" explains the reason why coherently and concisely. I almost feel like suggesting we have

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the article reprinted as a pamphlet and handed out by the curmudgeons of the SF world, among whom I rapidly seem to be qualifying for membership.

And an interesting book column about the legacy of Catherine, Leigh, and Alice Mary. (I think you qualify for curmudgeon status if you automatically filled in the last names of each as you read the opening of the column. . . !)

Michael O'Brien
New Town, Tasmania
Australia

Hi *Asimov's* folks,

Just a note to thank you for your fine work—I get a great deal of pleasure out of your magazine. But I have just one request:

Please
Please
Please!

No more "Curse of the ( )'s Wife" poems.

Please?

It was cute for a while, but after the umpteenth-billion repetition of this shtick, I'm thinking about writing a poem of my own, titled "Curse of the *Asimov's* Reader." Has Bruce Boston completely given over his writing career to this bit? It's old. It's tired. Please don't inflict any more of these on us. I don't care if Gardner Dozois owes Boston five bucks from miniature golf, it's not worth the grief and anxiety these things are spreading in otherwise happy, normal *Asimov's* readers.

Tom Repetti
from the Internet

Dear Mr. Silverberg:

I was glad to see your column on Gresham's Law in the March issue of *Asimov's*. But at this point, about all I can say is, "Welcome to the club." Having outgrown young adult SF some years ago, I found there was nowhere else for a literate woman to go. The powers that be in SF allow for no gender difference in adult taste. Plus, as you've found; though I have considerable buying power as a professional adult, I can't compete with the mass of teen-aged boys.

I was recently told by a major editor that nothing was published for adult women because adult women don't read. It makes me wonder who buys all those romance novels (Isn't it 60% of the market now?). I like dramatic work, cleverness, and biting social commentary, and I can't personally stomach romance; so, as you've said, I spend a lot of time in front of the mystery rack, where sometimes I find what I want.

I've followed the rocky careers of my favorite women writers: Notice that Ursula K. Le Guin has gone off to write mainstream. Tanith Lee, after various attempts to satisfy the market, has taken to writing horror. C.J. Cherryh has adapted by dropping almost into young adult, previously inhabited by Andre Norton and Anne McCaffrey.

SF's reputation takes a beating as it becomes more juvenile and more infested with horror and technoporn. The problem is circular, of course. The policies of the

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past have driven away more than half of possible readers, while youngsters continue to become less literate. When the market bottoms out, how will publishers and editors get back the audience they've spent all those years driving away?
Sincerely,

Lela E. Buis
Merritt Island, FL

The editor who told you that "adult women don't read" is probably in some other line of work now. All the surveys I've seen show that adult women do most *of the book buying in this country, from romance novels on up through literary fiction—with the exception of genres such as military fiction (Tom Clancy, etc.) and science fiction, where most of the purchasers are men and boys. As publishers abandon the SF field almost entirely to the tastes of the kids, women readers seem to be migrating toward the mystery field, where a big market has developed for complex adult work that often features female protagonists. Those women readers with a taste for something more speculative are apparently reading fantasy and/or* Star Trek *novels; science fiction as we once knew it is apparently being ghettoized back into slam-bang adventure stuff for boys, which is what it was in the pulp magazines of fifty years ago.*

—Robert Silverberg

Dear Editors,

Just wanted to say that Robert Reed's "Dreams from a Severed Heart" in the March issue is the first science fiction story I've read in a long long long time that had a really different protagonist's viewpoint and/or setup. I've never seen a posited future in which humans "go ahead" and leave the world to other species to put it badly. Just amazing. And well written, of course. This one will stay with me.

The story illustration by Steve Cavallo was also exceptional. Come to think of it, the cover too was exceptional, not just because both illustrations included seminaked women, but because the women were drawn so well—I could feel their emotions through the illustrations. Few drawings demonstrate this deep a connection to/interpretation of the story.

While I'm at it I must say that, while I appreciate Mr. Silverberg's other writings, I find he lacks a lot as the editorialist for *Asimov's*. Methinks it would be better to put in another short story. Sorry, but I find that I have to struggle through, with not much gained in the end.

Guess now I'll read the rest of the issue. Thanks again.
Sincerely,

Hugo Buehring
Honolulu, HI

Dear Mr. Dozois:

Your Robert Silverberg's "Gresham's Law" editorial in the March issue got me thinking. I share his concern about the growth of low-grade series junk that has squeezed out serious contemporary SF, as well as the classic works of the last

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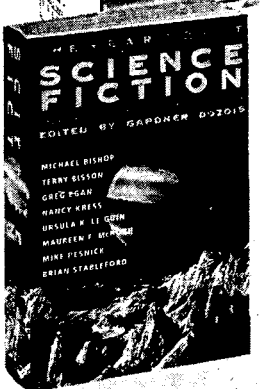

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fifty years. I do have a hope, though. Barry Malzberg once argued that the SF readership turns over once every four years (the time a student spends in high school). I'm hoping that the next batch of readers will be a little more sophisticated and a little more historically minded; perhaps then the publisher might be able to make money by keeping Fritz Leiber, Theodore Sturgeon, and Christopher Anvil in print.

For myself, I get most of my SF at used bookstores; the local library also has a good selection of old anthologies (*Orbit*, the *Galaxy* readers, *Dangerous Visions*, that sort of thing). Lately a lot of my reading is directly from the old digests. Sixties-era *Analogs, Galaxys, Ifs* are available if you know where to look and they usually cost a buck or two apiece. Believe me, I like this stuff a *lot*. The 60s produced a lot of good short fiction; some is rather sophisticated and cynical, with a satiric bent you don't often find today. Even the basic adventure stories had a good deal of scientific and SF content, in contrast to the romantic fantasy characteristic of the 90s.

If you are right about the dumbing-down of SF, with the fandom unaware of the great work done as recently as twenty years ago, this leads to another possibility. Some enterprising writers might go to school by studying the old digests and anthologies, learning to replicate the spirit and much of the content of this literature. Even if they produce straight pastiche of old Jack Vance, Cordwainer Smith, and Randall Garrett, I would bet that a lot of this would look new and exciting to fans who date the Golden Age back no farther than *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*. Readers will be amazed, editors will be confounded. Some critics will sneer and call it derivative; others will celebrate the advent of post-modern eclecticism. Lots of stuff gets published, until four years go by and the readership turns over again.

Sincerely,

Kevin W. Welch
Buffalo, NY

The problem I see is that each new "generation" of SF readers, finding available in print only the most popular (i.e., the dumbest, usually) of the SF books of the previous few years, will base their ideal vision of SF on those books alone, and, if they ever come across Golden Age material, will find it deficient in episodes of brutal space battle, quests for the Wand of Power, and other key features of the current product. They wouldn't like it even if they could find it. Which is how we get a downward spiral of the sort that's been going on, fiction that's dumber and dumber and dumber and more and more popular as we march onward from decade to decade.

—Robert Silverberg

Dear Mr. Silverberg,

What an amazing editorial in the March issue, so wedded to the notion that the market should rule

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that you can only be wistful about the fact that all the best science fiction is out of print.

At the University of California, Riverside, all the science fiction books you mention are available for reading or photocopying. Other campuses elsewhere must have similar stores, but UCR is devoted to science fiction, and has a special section of its library for it. It comes close to having a copy of every science fiction novel published in America in this century.

Academies are part of society, too, even part of capitalistic society. Why not admit to their existence as you discuss the current science fiction situation? If I recall correctly, books like *The Stars My Destination* used to be out of print most of the time, though a new paperback edition would come out every few years—and you'd be lucky if you stumbled across it.

Would it make you uncomfortable to feel that mature science fiction readers might come to rely on minority publications and academic centers, just as readers of epics, then of classic drama, then of lyric poetry, then of great novels, have had to do in the course of history? I suspect you have such an animus against elitism that you can't bear being part of a perfectly normal historical process.

Not only are fifty-year-old literary works (or movies) of ALL sorts primarily the concern of scholars and minority audiences, they always have been. Dickens is a minority taste now, and Agatha Christie soon will be—and both of these authors were outsold by garbage, if not by one single garbage author then by the mass of garbage in general, during their own lifetimes.

So what are you going on about? Sincerely,

Jim Rawley

Spoken like a true academic. It's nice to have great works of literature enshrined in places like the U.C. Riverside Library, but I'd also like to see the classic works of SF out there in bookstores where the public has access to them. Dickens and Christie, by the way, are doing very nicely in mass-market paperback editions even unto this moment—but not Theodore Sturgeon, Jack Vance, Clifford D. Simak, Henry Kuttner, and James Blish, to name just a few great masters of SF whose superb books are largely unobtainable because publishers (falsely, I like to think) have come to believe that there's no audience for them.

PS: I love the idea that you think I have "an animus against elitism." Boy, you don't know me at all, do you?

—Robert Silverberg

Hi!

I've just read Robert Silverberg's column in the March *Asimov's* and my lawyers will be getting in touch with you and yours regarding my recent series of books involving *Glibabibion vs the Galaxy Eaters* and *Glibabibion Meets the Vampires of the Void.* I've been laboring in secret many days to complete these novels, only to see them

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trashed even before they've been accepted by a publisher, and by such an august personage (and one of my personal heroes) as Robert Silverberg.

I've read some of the latest SF to be released and I saw an immediate need for GvtGE and CmtVotV (that would be *Glibabibion vs the Galaxy Eaters* and *Glibabibion Meets the Vampires of the Void,* of course). These books fulfill the need for meaningful, insightful, high quality SF, encompassing all the emotions and classy writing styles brought to the genre by the likes of "Perry Rodan" or the novelizations of such films as *Godzilla vs Gigan* or *Predator II.*

At any rate, I must say I always enjoy reading your magazine and even Mr. Silverberg's column (except when he reveals my most secret writing projects), and I look forward to many years of enjoyment with all your wonderful writers and columnists—even IF my lawyers fulfill my request to "Grind them into DUST!"

Yours,

C. Woody Butler
Linthicum, MD

Oh, go ahead and send your manuscripts to one of the SF publishers. They don't care what I say, anyhow. The worst that'll happen is that they'll send you a check for a couple of million bucks by return mail.

—Robert Silverberg

Dear Robert Silverberg:

In the April 1995 issue of *Asimov's,* Susan Hathaway took you to task over the use of the term "brain dead," but unfortunately managed to get it all wrong and perpetuate a common public misconception about brain death and organ donation.

When a person is declared to be brain dead, that person has suffered significant, irreversible damage to the brain (such as from a massive stroke, head trauma or brain tumor). That person is in an irreversible coma and dependent on a ventilator to breathe, but the heart is still beating and pumping blood to the organs of the body. This means that the person's brain is dead but the body remains very much alive so long as the ventilator continues to force air in and out of the lungs. Several simple bedside tests are carried out by physicians to verify that brain death has occurred in an individual; the exact test criteria that are required to certify brain death vary slightly among the experts in this field.

In contrast, the term "really dead" (to use Susan Hathaway's term) DOES differ from "brain dead." A "really dead" person's brain AND body are irreversibly in death as a result of the heart ceasing to pump blood to the critical organs.

Why is it so important to rely on brain dead patients for organ donation? The major organs that can be transplanted (heart, lungs, liver, and kidneys) will suffer irreversible damage within minutes of the heart stopping. It is only in the unique situation of brain death,

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where the heart continues to pump oxygenated blood to all organs, that it is possible to harvest and transplant the major organs. Once a body is "really dead" for more than a few minutes, only such tissues as the corneas or bone (which don't require much blood flow, and hence take longer to die) can be harvested.

A "really dead" person is NOT a candidate for organ harvest, as Hathaway suggested. All too often next of kin share this widespread misconception, and first consider the topic of organ transplantation after a person has died, by which time it is unfortunately too late to transplant any of the major organs.

Many dying people are not suitable candidates for organ donation because brain death does not usually precede body death, or because the person's underlying disease (e.g., cancer, infection, cardivascular disease) has rendered the organs unsuitable for transplant.

I hope that this letter might help readers of *Asimov's* to better understand these issues, and clear up the confusion perpetuated by Hathaway's letter.

Regards,

Christopher Kovacs, MD, FRCPC
Endocrine Unit
Massachusetts General Hospital
Harvard Medical School
Boston, Massachusetts

We appreciate comments about the magazine, and would like to hear from more of our readers. Editorial correspondence should include the writers name and address. Letters can be E-mailed to 71154.662@compuserve.com or posted to Letters to the Editor, *Asimov's*, 1540 Broadway, New York, NY 10036. Letters may be shortened and edited for publication.

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Nancy Kress

EVOLUTION

Beggars and Choosers, which is the author's most recent novel and a sequel to her highly acclaimed *Beggars in Spain*, is currently a finalist for the 1995 Hugo award. We hope the disastrous scenario Ms. Kress chillingly evokes in her latest tale does not describe the "Evolution" of our own near future.

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

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"Somebody shot and killed Dr. Bennett behind the Food Mart on April Street!" Ceci Moore says breathlessly as I take the washing off the line.

I stand with a pair of Jack's boxer shorts in my hand and stare at her. I don't like Ceci. Her smirking pushiness, her need to shove her scrawny body into the middle of every situation, even ones she'd be better off leaving alone. She's been that way since high school. But we're neighbors; we're stuck with each other. Dr. Bennett delivered both Sean and Jackie. Slowly I fold the boxer shorts and lay them in my clothesbasket.

"Well, Betty, aren't you even going to *say* anything?"

"Have the police arrested anybody?"

"Janie Brunelli says there's no suspects." Tom Brunelli is one of Emerton's police officers. There are only five of them. He has trouble keeping his mouth shut. "Honestly, Betty, you look like there's a murder in this town every day!"

"Was it in the parking lot?" I'm in that parking lot behind the Food Mart every week. It's unpaved, just hardpacked rocky dirt sloping down to a low concrete wall by the river. I take Jackie's sheets off the line. Belle, Ariel, and Princess Jasmine all smile through fields of flowers.

"Yes, in the parking lot," Ceci says. "Near the dumpsters. There must have been a silencer on the rifle, nobody heard anything. Tom found two .22 250 semi-automatic cartridges." Ceci knows about guns. Her house is full of them. "Betty, why don't you put all this wash in your dryer and save yourself the trouble of hanging it all out?"

"I like the way it smells line-dried. And I can hear Jackie through the window."

Instantly Ceci's face changes. "Jackie's home from school? Why?"

"She has a cold."

"Are you sure it's just a cold?"

"I'm sure." I take the clothespins off Sean's T-shirt. The front says SEE DICK DRINK. SEE DICK DRIVE. SEE DICK DIE. "Ceci, Jackie is not on any antibiotics."

"Good thing," Ceci says, and for a moment she studies her fingernails, very casual. "They say Dr. Bennett prescribed endozine again last week. For the youngest Nordstrum boy. *Without* sending him to the hospital."

I don't answer. The back of Sean's T-shirt says DON'T BE A DICK. Irritated by my silence, Ceci says, "I don't see how you can let your son wear that obscene clothing!"

"It's his choice. Besides, Ceci, it's a health message. About not drinking and driving. Aren't you the one that thinks strong health messages are a good thing?"

Our eyes lock. The silence lengthens. Finally Ceci says, "Well, haven't *we* gotten serious all of a sudden."

I say, "Murder is serious."

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"Yes. I'm sure the cops will catch whoever did it. Probably one of those scum that hang around the Rainbow Bar."

"Dr. Bennett wasn't the type to hang around with scum."

"Oh, I don't mean he *knew* them. Some low-life probably killed him for his wallet." She looks straight into my eyes. "I can't think of any other motive. Can you?"

I look east, toward the river. On the other side, just visible over the tops of houses on its little hill, rise the three stories of Emerton Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hospital. The bridge over the river was blown up three weeks ago. No injuries, no suspects. Now anybody who wants to go to the hospital has to drive ten miles up West River Road and cross at the interstate. Jack told me that the Department of Transportation says two years to get a new bridge built.

I say, "Dr. Bennett was a good doctor. And a good man."

"Well, did anybody say he wasn't? Really, Betty, you should use your dryer and save yourself all that bending and stooping. Bad for the back. We're not getting any younger. Ta-ta." She waves her right hand, just a waggle of fingers, and walks off. Her nails, I notice, are painted the delicate fragile pinky white of freshly unscabbed skin.

"You have no proof," Jack says. "Just some wild suspicions."

He has his stubborn face on. He sits with his Michelob at the kitchen table, dog-tired from his factory shift plus three hours overtime, and he doesn't want to hear this. I don't blame him. I don't want to be saying it. In the living room Jackie plays Nintendo frantically, trying to cram in as many electronic explosions as she can before her father claims the TV for Monday night football. Sean has already gone out with his friends, before his stepfather got home.

I sit down across from Jack, a fresh mug of coffee cradled between my palms. For warmth. "I know I don't have any proof, Jack. I'm not some detective."

"So let the cops handle it. It's their business, not ours. You stay out of it."

"I am out of it. You know that." Jack nods. We don't mix with cops, don't serve on any town committees, don't even listen to the news much. We don't get involved with what doesn't concern us. Jack never did. I add, "I'm just telling you what I think. I can do that, can't I?" and hear my voice stuck someplace between pleading and anger.

Jack hears it, too. He scowls, stands with his beer, puts his hand gently on my shoulder. "Sure, Bets. You can say whatever you want to me. But nobody else, you hear? I don't want no trouble, especially to you and the kids. This ain't our problem. Just be grateful *we're* all healthy, knock on wood."

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'He smiles and goes into the living room. Jackie switches off the Nintendo without being yelled at; she's good that way. I look out the kitchen window, but it's too dark to see anything but my own reflection, and anyway the window faces north, not east.

I haven't crossed the river since Jackie was born at Emerton Memorial, seven years ago. And then I was in the hospital less than twenty-four hours before I made Jack take me home. Not because of the infections, of course—all that hadn't started yet. But it has now, and what if next time instead of the youngest Nordstrum boy, it's Jackie who needs endozine? Or Sean?

Once you've been to Emerton Memorial, nobody but your family will go near you. And sometimes not even them. When Mrs. Weimer came home from surgery, her daughter-in-law put her in that back upstairs room and left her food on disposable trays in the doorway and put in a chemical toilet. Didn't even help the old lady crawl out of bed to use it. For a whole month it went on like that—surgical masks, gloves, paper gowns—until Rosie Weimer was positive Mrs. Weimer hadn't picked up any mutated drug-resistant bacteria in Emerton Memorial. And Hal Weimer didn't say a word against his wife.

"People are scared, but they'll do the right thing," Jack said, the only other time I tried to talk to him about it. Jack isn't much for talking. And so I don't. I owe him that.

But in the city—in all the cities—they're not just scared. They're terrified. Even without listening to the news I hear about the riots and the special government police and half the population sick with the new germs that only endozine cures—sometimes. I don't see how they're going to have much energy for one murdered small-town doctor. And I don't share Jack's conviction that people in Emerton will automatically do the right thing. I remember all too well that sometimes they don't. How come Jack doesn't remember, too?

But he's right about one thing: I don't owe this town anything.

I stack the supper dishes in the sink and get Jackie started on her homework.

The next day, I drive down to the Food Mart parking lot.

There isn't much to see. It rained last night. Next to the dumpster lie a wadded-up surgical glove and a piece of yellow tape like the police use around a crime scene. Also some of those little black cardboard boxes from the stuff that gets used up by the new holographic TV cameras. That's it.

"You heard what happened to Dr. Bennett," I say to Sean at dinner. Jack's working again. Jackie sits playing with the Barbie doll she doesn't know I know she has on her lap.

Sean looks at me sideways, under the heavy fringe of his dark bangs,

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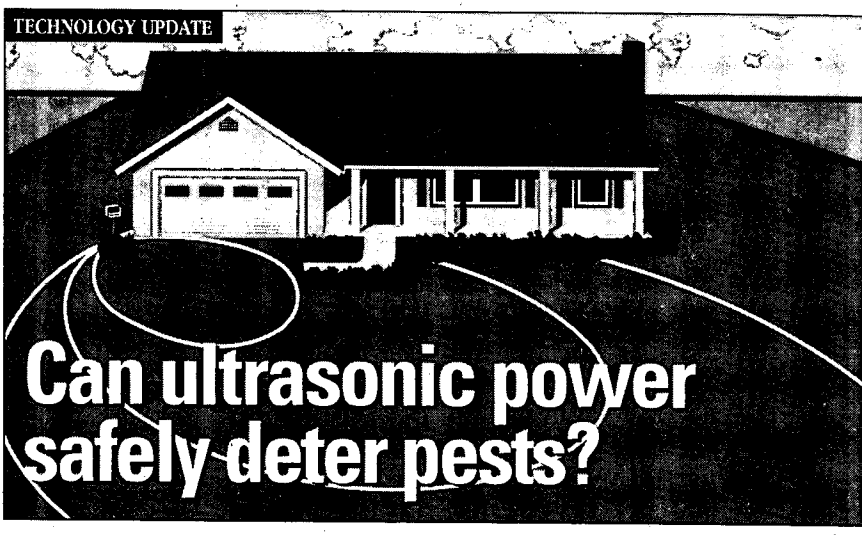

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and I can't read his expression. "He was killed for giving out too many antibiotics."

Jackie looks up. "Who killed the doctor?"

"The bastards that think they run this town," Sean says. He flicks the hair out of his eyes. His face is ashy gray. "Fucking vigilantes'll get us all."

"That's enough, Sean," I say.

Jackie's lip trembles. "Who'll get us all? Mommy . . ."

"Nobody's getting anybody," I say. "Sean, stop it. You're scaring her."

"Well, she should be scared," Sean says, but he shuts up and stares bleakly at his plate. Sixteen now, I've had him for sixteen years. Watching him, his thick dark hair and sulky mouth, I think that it's a sin to have a favorite child. And that I can't help it, and that I would, God forgive me, sacrifice both Jackie and Jack for this boy.

"I want you to clean the garage tonight, Sean. You promised Jack three days ago now."

"Tomorrow. Tonight I have to go out."

Jackie says, "Why should I be scared?"

"Tonight," I say.

Sean looks at me with teenage desperation. His eyes are very blue. "Not tonight. I have to go out."

Jackie says, "Why should I—"

I say, "You're staying home and cleaning the garage."

"No." He glares at me, and then breaks. He has his father's looks, but he's not really like his father. There are even tears in the corners of his eyes. "I'll do it tomorrow, Mom, I promise. Right after school. But tonight I have to go out."

"Where?"

"Just out."

Jackie says, "Why should I be scared? Scared of what? Mommy!"

Sean turns to her. "You shouldn't be scared, Jack-o-lantern. Everything's going to be all right. One way or another."

I listen to the tone of his voice and suddenly fear shoots through me, piercing as childbirth. I say, "Jackie, you can play Nintendo now. I'll clear the table."

Her face brightens. She skips into the living room and I look at my son. "What does that mean? 'One way or another'? Sean, what's going on?"

"Nothing," he says, and then despite his ashy color he looks me straight in the eyes, and smiles tenderly, and for the first time—the very first time—I see his resemblance to his father. He can lie to me with tenderness.

Two days later, just after I return from the Food Mart, they contact me. The murder was on the news for two nights, and then disappeared.

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Over the parking lot is scattered more TV-camera litter. There's also a wine bottle buried halfway into the hard ground, with a bouquet of yellow roses in it. Nearby is an empty basket, the kind that comes filled with expensive dried flowers at Blossoms by Bonnie, weighted down with stones. Staring at it, I remember that Bonnie Widelstein went out of business a few months ago. A drug-resistant abscess, and after she got out of Emerton Memorial, nobody on this side of the river would buy flowers from her.

At home, Sylvia James is sitting in my driveway in her black Algol. As soon as I see her, I put it together.

"Sylvia," I say tonelessly.

She climbs out of the sportscar and smiles a social smile. "Elizabeth! How good to see you!" I don't answer. She hasn't seen me in seventeen years. She's carrying a cheese kuchen, like some sort of key into my house. She's still blonde, still slim, still well dressed. Her lipstick is bright red, which is what her face should be.

I let her in anyway, my heart making slow hard thuds in my chest. *Sean. Sean.*

Once inside, her hard smile fades and she has the grace to look embarrassed. "Elizabeth—"

"Betty," I say. "I go by Betty now."

"Betty. First off, I want to apologize for not being . . . for not standing by you in that mess. I know it was so long ago, but even so, I—I wasn't a very good friend." She hesitates. "I was frightened by it all."

I want to say, *You* were frightened? But I don't.

I never think of the whole dumb story any more. Not even when I look at Sean. Especially not when I look at Sean.

Seventeen years ago, when Sylvia and I were seniors in high school, we were best friends. Neither of us had a sister, so we made each other into that, even though her family wasn't crazy about their precious daughter hanging around with someone like me. The Goddards live on the other side of the river. Sylvia ignored them, and I ignored the drunken warnings of my aunt, the closest thing I had to a family. The differences didn't matter. We were Sylvia-and-Elizabeth, the two prettiest and boldest girls in the senior class who had an academic future.

And then, suddenly, I didn't. At Elizabeth's house I met Randolf Satler, young resident in her father's unit at the hospital. And I got pregnant, and Randy dumped me, and I refused a paternity test because if he didn't want me and the baby I had too much pride to force myself on any man. That's what I told everyone, including myself. I was eighteen years old. I didn't know what a common story mine was, or what a dreary one. I thought I was the only one in the whole wide world who had ever felt this bad.

So after Sean was born at Emerton Memorial and Randy got engaged

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the day I moved my baby "home" to my dying aunt's, I bought a Smith & Wesson revolver in the city and shot out the windows of Randy's supposedly empty house across the river. I hit the gardener, who was helping himself to the Satler liquor cabinet in the living room. The judge gave me seven-and-a-half to ten, and I served five, and that only because my lawyer pleaded post-partum depression. The gardener recovered and retired to Miami, and Dr. Satler went on to become Chief of Medicine at Emerton Memorial and a lot of other important things in the city, and Sylvia never visited me once in Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. Nobody did, except Jack. Who, when Sylvia-and-Elizabeth were strutting their stuff at Emerton High, had already dropped out and was bagging groceries at the Food Mart. After I got out of Bedford, the only reason the foster-care people would give me Sean back was because Jack married me.

We live in Emerton, but not of it.

Sylvia puts her kuchen on the kitchen table and sits down without being asked. I can see she's done with apologizing. She's still smart enough to know there are things you can't apologize for.

"Eliz . . . Betty, I'm not here about the past. I'm here about Dr. Bennett's murder."

"That doesn't have anything to do with me."

"It has to do with all of us. Dan Moore lives next door to you."

I don't say anything.

"He and Ceci and Jim Dyer and Tom Brunelli are the ringleaders in a secret organization to close Emerton Memorial Hospital. They think the hospital is a breeding ground for the infections resistant to every antibiotic except endozine. Well, they're right about that—all hospitals are. But Dan and his group are determined to punish any doctor who prescribes endozine, so that no organisms develop a resistance to *it,* too, and it's kept effective in case one of *them* needs it."

"Sylvia—" the name tastes funny in my mouth, after all this time "—I'm telling you this doesn't have anything to do with me."

"And I'm telling you it does. We need you, Eliz . . . Betty. You live next door to Dan and Ceci. You can tell us when they leave the house, who comes to it, anything suspicious you see. We're not a vigilante group, Betty, like they are. We aren't doing anything illegal. We don't kill people, and we don't blow up bridges, and we don't threaten people like the Nordstrums who get endozine for their sick kids but are basically uneducated blue collar—"

She stops. Jack and I are basically uneducated blue collar. I say coldly, "I can't help you, Sylvia."

"I'm sorry, Betty. That wasn't what I meant. Look, this is more important than anything that happened a decade and a half ago! Don't you *understand?"* She leans toward me across the table. "The whole country's

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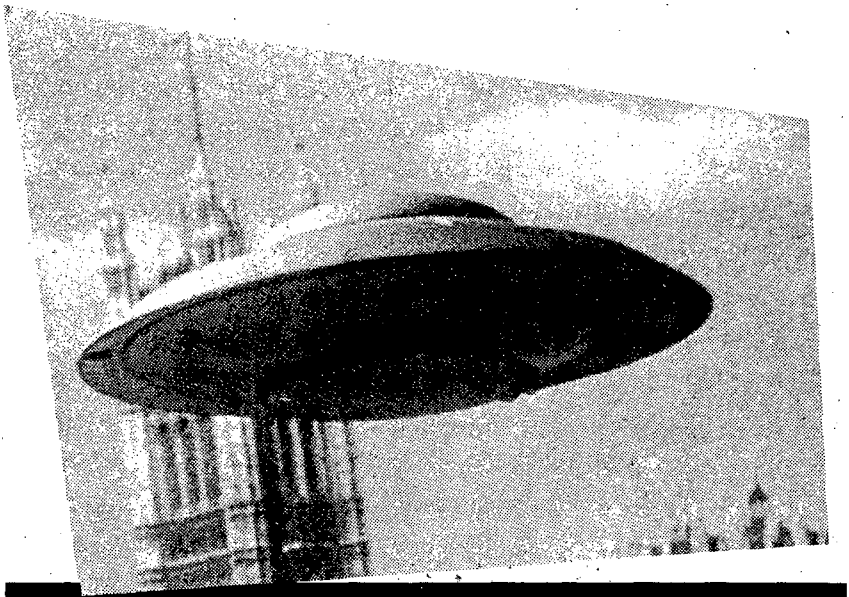

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caught in this thing. It's already a public health crisis as big as the Spanish influenza epidemic of 1918, and it's only just started! Drug-resistant bacteria can produce a new generation every twenty minutes, they can swap resistant genes not only within a species but across *different* species. The bacteria are *winning*. And people like the Moores are taking advantage of that to contribute further to the breakdown of even basic social decency."

In high school Sylvia had been on the debating team. But so, in that other life, had I. "If the Moores's group is trying to keep endozine from being used, then aren't they also fighting against the development of more drug-resistant bacteria? And if that's so, aren't they the ones, not you, who are ultimately aiding the country's public health?"

"Through dynamiting. And intimidation. And murder. Betty, I know you don't approve of those things. I wouldn't be here telling you about our countergroup if I thought you did. Before I came here, we looked very carefully at you. At the kind of person you are. Are now. You and your husband are law-abiding people, you vote, you make a contribution to the Orphans of AIDS Fund, you—"

"How did you know about that? That's supposed to be a secret contribution!"

"—you signed the petition to protect the homeless from harassment. Your husband served on the jury that convicted Paul Keene of fraud, even though his real-estate scheme was so good for the economy of Emerton. You—"

"Stop it," I say. "You don't have any right to investigate me like I was some criminal!"

Only, of course, I was. Once. Not now. Sylvia's right about that—Jack and I believe in law and order, but for different reasons. Jack because that's what his father believed in, and his grandfather. Me, because I learned in Bedford that enforced rules are the only thing that even halfway restrains the kind of predators Sylvia James never dreamed of. The kind I want kept away from my children.

Sylvia says, "We have a lot of people on our side, Betty. People who don't want to see this town slide into the same kind of violence there is in Albany and Syracuse and, worst case, New York."

A month ago, New York Hospital in Queens was blown up. The whole thing, with a series of coordinated timed bombs. Seventeen hundred people dead in less than a minute.

"It's a varied group," she continues. "Some town leaders, some housewives, some teachers, nearly all the medical personnel at the hospital. All people who care what happens to Emerton."

"Then you've got the wrong person here," I say, and it comes out harsher than I want to reveal. "I don't care about Emerton."

"You have reasons," Sylvia says evenly. "And I'm part of your reasons,

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I know. But I think you'll help us, Elizabeth. I know you must be concerned about your son—we've all observed what a good mother you are."

So she brought up Sean's name first. I say, "You're wrong again, Sylvia. I don't need you to protect Sean, and if you've let him get involved in helping you, you'll wish you'd never been born. I've worked damn hard to make sure that what happened seventeen years ago never touches him. He doesn't need to get mixed up in any way with your 'medical personnel at the hospital.' And Sean sure the hell doesn't owe this town anything, there wasn't even anybody who would take him in after my aunt died, he had to go to—"

The look on her face stops me. Pure surprise. And then something else.

"Oh my God," she says. "Is it possible you don't know? Hasn't Sean told you?"

"Told me what?" I stand up, and I'm seventeen years old again, and just that scared. Sylvia-and-Elizabeth.

"Your son isn't helping our side. He's working for Dan Moore and Mike Dyer. They use juveniles because if they're caught, they won't be tried as severely as adults. We think Sean was one of the kids they used to blow up the bridge over the river."

I look first at the high school. Sean isn't there; he hadn't even shown up for homeroom. No one's home at his friend Tom's house, or at Keith's. He isn't at the Billiard Ball or the Emerton Diner or the American Bowl. After that, I run out of places to search.

This doesn't happen in places like Emerton. We have fights at basketball games and grand theft auto and smashed store windows on Halloween and sometimes a drunken tragic car crash on prom night. But not secret terrorists, not counter-terrorist vigilante groups. Not in Emerton.

Not with my son.

I drive to the factory and make them page Jack.

He comes off the line, face creased with sweat and dirt. The air is filled with clanging machinery and grinding drills. I pull him outside the door, where there are benches and picnic tables for workers on break. "Betty! What is it?"

"Sean," I gasp. "He's in danger."

Something shifts behind Jack's eyes. "What kind of danger?"

"Sylvia Goddard came to see me today. Sylvia James. She says Sean is involved with the group that blew up the bridge, the ones who are trying to get Emerton Memorial closed, and . . . and killed Dr. Bennett."

Jack peels off his bench gloves, taking his time. Finally he looks up at me. "How come that bitch Sylvia Goddard comes to you with this? After all this time?"

"Jack! Is that all you can think of? Sean is in trouble!"

He says gently, "Well, Bets, it was bound to happen sooner or later,

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wasn't it? He's always been a tough kid to raise. Rebellious. Can't tell him anything."

I stare at Jack.

"Some people just have to learn the hard way."

"Jack . . . this is serious! Sean might be involved in terrorism! He could end up in jail!"

"Couldn't ever tell him anything," Jack says, and I hear the hidden satisfaction in his voice, that he doesn't even know is there. Not *his* son. Dr. Randy Satler's son. Turning out bad.

"Look," Jack says, "when the shift ends I'll go look for him, Bets. Bring him home. You go and wait there for us." His face is gentle, soothing. He really will find Sean, if it's possible. But only because he loves me.

My sudden surge of hatred is so strong I can't even speak.

"Go on home, Bets. It'll be all right. Sean just needs to have the nonsense kicked out of him."

I turn and walk away. At the turning in the parking lot, I see Jack walking jauntily back inside, pulling on his gloves.

I drive home, because I can't think what else to do. I sit on the couch and reach back in my mind, for that other place, the place I haven't gone to since I got out of Bedford. The gray granite place that turns you to granite, too, so you can sit and wait for hours, for weeks, for years, without feeling very much. I go into that place, and I become the Elizabeth I was then, when Sean was in foster care someplace and I didn't know who had him or what they might be doing to him or how I would get him back. I go into the gray granite place to become stone.

And it doesn't work.

It's been too long. I've had Sean too long. Jack has made me feel too safe. I can't find the stony place.

Jackie is spending the night at a friend's. I sit in the dark, no lights on, car in the garage. Sean doesn't come home, and neither does Jack. At two in the morning, a lot of people in dark clothing cross the back lawn and quietly enter Dan and Ceci's house next door, carrying bulky packages wrapped in black cloth.

Jack staggers in at six-thirty in the morning. Alone. His face droops with exhaustion.

"I couldn't find him, Betty. I looked everywhere."

"Thank you," I say, and he nods. Accepting my thanks. This was something he did for me, not for Sean. Not for himself, as Sean's stepfather. I push down my sudden anger and say, "You better get some sleep."

"Right." He goes down the narrow hallway into our bedroom. In three minutes he's snoring.

I let the car coast in neutral down the driveway. Our bedroom faces the street. The curtains don't stir.

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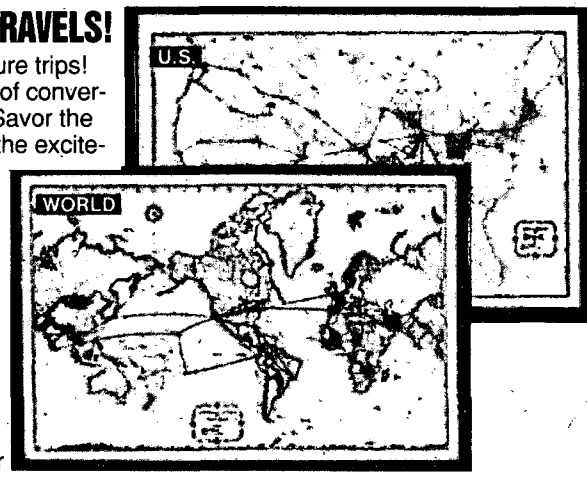

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The West River Road is deserted, except for a few eighteen-wheelers. I cross the river at the interstate and start back along the east side. Three miles along, in the middle of farmland, the smell of burned flesh rolls in the window.

Cows, close to the pasture fence. I stop the car and get out. Fifteen or sixteen Holsteins. By straining over the fence, I can see the bullet holes in their heads. Somebody herded them together, shot them one by one, and started a half-hearted fire among the bodies with neatly cut firewood. The fire had gone out; it didn't look as if it was supposed to burn long. Just long enough to attract attention that hadn't come yet.

I'd never heard that cows could get human diseases. Why had they been shot?

I get back in my car and drive the rest of the way to Emerton Memorial.

This side of town is deathly quiet. Grass grows unmowed in yard after yard. One large, expensive house has old newspapers piled on the porch steps, ten or twelve of them. There are no kids waiting for school buses, no cars pulling out of driveways on the way to work. The hospital parking lot has huge empty stretches between cars. At the last minute I drive on through the lot, parking instead across the street in somebody's empty driveway, under a clump of trees.

Nobody sits at the information desk. The gift shop is locked. Nobody speaks to me as I study the directory on the lobby wall, even though two figures in gowns and masks hurry past. CHIEF OF MEDICINE, DR. RANDOLF SATLER. Third floor, east wing. The elevator is deserted.

It stops at the second floor. When the doors open a man stands there, a middle-aged farmer in overalls and work boots, his eyes red and swollen like he's been crying. There are tinted windows across from the elevators and I can see the back of him reflected in the glass. Coming and going. From somewhere I hear a voice calling, "Nurse, oh nurse, oh God . . ." A gurney sits in the hallway, the body on it covered by a sheet up to the neck. The man in overalls looks at me and raises both hands to ward off the elevator, like it's some kind of demon. He steps backward. The doors close.

I grip the railing on the elevator wall.

The third floor looks empty. Bright arrows lead along the hallways: yellow for PATHOLOGY and LAB SERVICES, green for RESPIRATORY THERAPY, red for SUPPORT SERVICES. I follow the yellow arrow.

It dead-ends at an empty alcove with chairs, magazines thrown on the floor. And three locked doors off a short corridor that's little more than an alcove.

I pick the farthest door and pound on it. No words, just regular blows of my fist. After a minute, I start on the second one. A voice calls, "Who's there?"

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I recognize the voice, even through the locked door. Even after seventeen years. I shout, "Police! Open the door!"

And he does. The second it cracks, I shove it hard and push my way into the lab.

"Elizabeth?"

He's older, heavier, but still the same. Dark hair, blue eyes . . . I look at that face every day at dinner. I've looked at it at soccer matches, in school plays, in his playpen. Dr. Satler looks more shaken to see me than I would have thought, his face white, sweat on his forehead.

"Hello, Randy."

"Elizabeth. You can't come in here. You have to leave—"

"Because of the staph? Do you think I care about that? After all, I'm in the hospital, right, Randy? This is where the endozine is. This place is safe. Unless it gets blown up while I'm standing here."

He stares at my left hand, still gripping the doorknob behind me. Then at the gun in my right hand. A seventeen-year-old Smith & Wesson, and for five of those years the gun wasn't cleaned or oiled, hidden under my aunt's garage. But it still fires.

"I'm not going to shoot you, Randy, I don't care if you're alive or dead. But you're going to help me. I can't find my son—" *your son* "—and Sylvia Goddard told me he's mixed up with that group that blew up the bridge. He's hiding with them someplace, probably scared out of his skull. You know everybody in town, everybody with power, you're going to get on that phone there and find out where Sean is."

"I would do that anyway," Randy says, and now he looks the way I remember him: impatient and arrogant. But not completely. There's still sweat on his pale face. "Put that stupid thing away, Elizabeth."

"No."

"Oh, for . . ." He turns his back on me and punches at the phone.

"Cam? Randy Satler here. Could you . . . no, it's not about that . . . No. Not yet."

Cameron Witt. The mayor. His son is chief of Emerton's five cops.

"I need a favor. There's a kid missing . . . I know that, Cam. You don't have to lecture *me* on how bad delay could. . . . But you might know about this kid. Sean Baker."

"Pulaski. Sean Pulaski." He doesn't even know that.

"Sean Pulaski. Yeah, that one . . . okay. Get back to me . . . I told you. *Not yet.*" He hangs up. "Cam will hunt around and call back. Now will you put that stupid gun away, Elizabeth?"

"You still don't say thank you for anything." The words just come out. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

"To Cam, or to you for not shooting me?" He says it evenly, and the evenness is the only way I finally see how furious he is. People don't

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order around Dr. Randy Satler at gun point. A part of my mind wonders why he doesn't call security.

I said, "All right, I'm here. Give me a dose of endozine, just in case."

He goes on staring at me with that same level, furious gaze. "Too late, Elizabeth."

"What do you mean, too late? Haven't you got endozine?"

"Of course we do." Suddenly he staggers slightly, puts out one hand behind him, and holds onto a table covered with glassware and papers.

"Randy. You're sick."

"I am. And not with anything endozine is going to cure. Ah, Elizabeth, why didn't you just phone me? I'd have looked for Sean for you."

"Oh, right. Like you've been so interested and helpful in raising him."

"You never asked me."

I see that he means it. He really believes his total lack of contact with his son is my fault. I see that Randy gives only what he's asked to. He waits, lordly, for people to plead for his help, beg for it, and then he gives it. If it suits him.

I say, "I'll bet anything your kids with your wife are turning out really scary."

The blood rushes to his face, and I know I guessed right. His blue eyes darken and he looks like Jack looks just before Jack explodes. But Randy isn't Jack. An explosion would be too clean for him. He says instead, "You were stupid to come here. Haven't you been listening to the news?"

I haven't.

"The CDC publicly announced just last night what medical personnel have seen for weeks. A virulent strain of staphylococcus aureus has incorporated endozine-resistant plasmids from enterococcus." He pauses to catch his breath. "And pneumococcus may have done the same thing."

"What does that mean?"

"It means, you stupid woman, that now there are highly contagious infections that we have no drugs to cure. No antibiotics at all, not even endozine. This staph is resistant to them all. And it can live everywhere."

I lower the gun. The empty parking lot. No security to summon. The man who wouldn't get on the elevator. And Randy's face. "And you've got it."

"We've all got it. Everyone . . . in the hospital. And for forcing your way in here, you probably do, too."

"You're going to die," I say, and it's half a hope.

And he *smiles*.

He stands there in his white lab coat, sweating like a horse, barely able to stand up straight, almost shot by a woman he'd once abandoned pregnant, and he smiles. His blue eyes gleam. He looks like a picture I once saw in a book, back when I read a lot. It takes me a minute to

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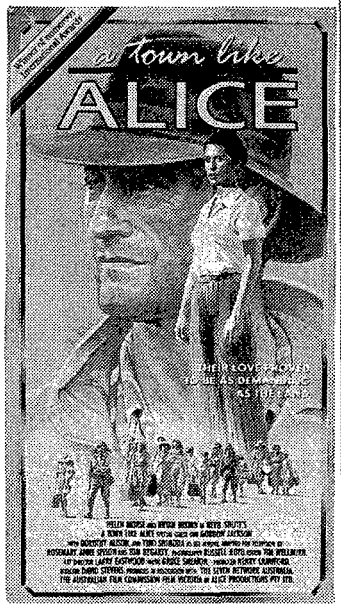

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remember that it was my high school World History book. A picture of some general.

"Everybody's going to die eventually," Randy says. "But not me right now. At least . . . I hope not." Casually he crosses the floor toward me, and I step backward. He smiles again.

"I'm not going to deliberately infect you, Elizabeth. I'm a *doctor*. I just want the gun."

"No."

"Have it your way. Look, how much do you know about the bubonic plague of the fourteenth century?"

"Nothing," I say, although I do. Why had I always acted stupider around Randy than I actually am?

"Then it won't mean anything to you to say that this mutated staph has at least that much potential—" again he paused and gulped air "—for rapid and fatal transmission. It flourishes everywhere. Even on doorknobs."

"So why the fuck are you *smiling?*" Alexander. That was the picture of the general. Alexander the Great.

"Because I . . . because the CDC distributed . . . I was on the national team to discover . . ." His face changes again. Goes even whiter. And he pitches over onto the floor.

I grab him, roll him face up, and feel his forehead. He's burning up. I bolt for the door. "Nurse! Doctor! There's a sick doctor here!"

Nobody comes.

I run down the corridors. Respiratory Therapy is empty. So is Support Services. I jab at the elevator button, but before it comes I run back to Randy.

And stand above him, lying there crumpled on the floor, laboring to breathe.

I'd dreamed about a moment like this for years. Dreamed it waking and asleep, in Emerton and in Bedford Hills and in Jack's arms. Dreamed it in a thousand ridiculous melodramatic versions. And here it is, Randy helpless and pleading, and me strong, standing over him, free to walk away and let him die. Free.

I wring out a towel in cold water and put it on his forehead. Then I find ice in the refrigerator in a corner of the lab and substitute that. He watches me, his breathing wheezy as old machinery.

"Elizabeth. Bring me . . . syringe in a box on . . . that table."

I do it. "Who should I get for you, Randy? Where?"

"Nobody. I'm not . . . as bad . . . as I sound. Yet. Just the initial . . . dyspnea." He picked up the syringe.

"Is there medicine for you in there? I thought you said endozine wouldn't work on this new infection." His color is a little better now.

"Not medicine. And not for me. For you."

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He looks at me steadily. And I see that Randy would never plead, never admit to helplessness. Never ever think of himself as helpless.

He lowers the hand holding the syringe back to the floor. "Listen, Elizabeth. You have . . . almost certainly have . . ."

Somewhere, distantly, a siren starts to wail. Randy ignores it. All of a sudden his voice becomes much firmer, even though he's sweating again and his eyes burn bright with fever. Or something.

"This staph is resistant to everything we can throw at it. We cultured it and tried. Cephalosporins and aminoglycosides and vancomycin, even endozine . . . I'll go into gram-positive septic shock . . ." His eyes glaze, but after a moment he seems to find his thought again. "We exhausted all points of counterattack. Cell wall, bacterial ribosome, folic acid pathway. Microbes just evolve countermeasures. Like beta-lactamase."

I don't understand this language. Even talking to himself, he's making me feel stupid again. I ask something I do understand.

"Why are people killing cows? Are the cows sick, too?"

He focuses again. "Cows? No, they're not sick. Farmers use massive doses of antibiotics to increase meat and milk production. Agricultural use of endozine has increased the rate of resistance development by over a thousand percent since—Elizabeth, this is irrelevant! Can't you pay attention to what I'm saying for three minutes?"

I stand up and look down at him, lying shivering on the floor. He doesn't even seem to notice, just keeps on lecturing.

"But antibiotics weren't invented by humans. They were invented by the microbes themselves to use . . . against each other and . . . they had two billion years of evolution at it before we even showed up. . . . We should have—where are you going?"

"Home. Have a nice life, Randy."

He says quietly, "I probably will. But if . . . you leave now, you're probably dead. And your husband and kids, too."

"Why? Damn it, stop lecturing and tell me why!"

"Because you're infected, and there's no antibiotic for it, but there *is* another bacteria that will attack the drug-resistant staph."

I look at the syringe in his hand.

"It's a Trojan horse plasmid. That's a . . . never mind. It can get into the staph in your blood and deliver a lethal gene. One that will kill the staph. It's an incredible discovery. But the only way to deliver it so far is to deliver the whole bacteria."

My knees all of a sudden get shaky. Randy watches me from his position on the floor. He looks shakier himself. His breathing turns raspier again.

"No, you're not sick yet, Elizabeth. But you will be."

I snap, "From the staph germs or from the cure?"

"Both."

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"You want to make me sicker. With two bacteria. And hope one will kill the other."

"Not hope. I *know*. I actually saw . . . it on the electromicrograph . . ." His eyes roll, refocus. ". . . could package just the lethal plasmid on a transpon if we had time . . . no time. Has to be the whole bacteria." And then, stronger, "The CDC team is working on it. But *I* actually caught it on the electromicrograph!"

I say, before I know I'm going to, "Stop congratulating yourself and give me the syringe. Before you die."

I move across the floor toward him, put my arms around him to prop him in a sitting position against the table leg. His whole body feels on fire. But somehow he keeps his hands steady as he injects the syringe into the inside of my elbow. While it drains sickness into me I say, "You never actually wanted me, did you, Randy? Even before Sean?"

"No," he says. "Not really." He drops the syringe.

I bend my arm. "You're a rotten human being. All you care about is yourself and your work."

He smiles the same cold smile. "So? My work is what matters. In a larger sense than you could possibly imagine. You were always a weak sentimentalist, Elizabeth. Now, go home."

"Go *home*? But you said . . ."

"I said you'd infect everyone. And you will—with the bacteria that attacks staph. It should cause only a fairly mild illness. Jenner . . . smallpox . . ."

"But you said I have the mutated staph, too!"

"You almost certainly do. Yes . . . And so will everyone else, before long. Deaths . . . in New York State alone . . . passed one million this morning. Six and a half percent of the . . . the population . . . Did you really think you could hide on your side of . . . the . . . river . . ."

"Randy!"

"Go . . . home."

I strip off his lab coat and wad it up for a pillow, bring more ice from the refrigerator, try to get him to drink some water.

"Go . . . home. Kiss everybody." He smiles to himself, and starts to shake with fever. His eyes close.

I stand up again. Should I go? Stay? If I could find someone in the hospital to take care of him—

The phone rings. I seize it. "Hello? Hello?"

"Randy? Excuse me, can I talk to Dr. Satler? This is Cameron Witt."

I try to sound professional. "Dr. Satler can't come to the phone right now. But if you're calling about Sean Pulaski, Dr. Satler asked me to take the message."

"I don't . . . oh, all right. Just tell Randy the Pulaski boy is with Richard and Sylvia James. He'll understand." The line clicks.

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I replace the receiver and stare at Randy, fighting for breath on the floor, his face as gray as Sean's when Sean realized it was murder he'd gotten involved with. No, not as gray. Because Sean had been terrified, and Randy is only sick.

My work is what matters.

But how had Sean known to go to Sylvia? Even if he knew from Ceci who was on the other side, how did he know which people would hide him, would protect him when I could not, Jack could not? Sylvia-and-Elizabeth. How much did Sean actually know about the past I'd tried so hard to keep from touching him?

I reach the elevator, my finger almost touching the button, when the first explosion rocks the hospital.

It's in the west wing. Through the windows opposite the elevator banks I see windows in the far end of the building explode outward. Thick greasy black smoke billows out the holes. Alarms begin to screech.

Don't touch the elevators. Instructions remembered from high school, from grade-school fire drills. I race along the hall to the fire stairs. What if they put a bomb in the stairwell? What if *who* put a bomb in the stairwell? *A lot of people in dark clothing cross the back lawn and quietly enter Dan and Ceci's house next door, carrying bulky packages wrapped in black cloth.*

A last glimpse through a window by the door to the fire stairs. People are running out of the building, not many, but the ones I see are pushing gurneys. A nurse staggers outside, three small children in her arms, on her hip, clinging to her back.

They aren't setting off any more bombs until people have a chance to get out.

I let the fire door close. Alarms scream. I run back to Pathology and shove open the heavy door.

Randy lies on the floor, sweating and shivering. His lips move but if he's muttering aloud, I can't hear it over the alarm. I tug on his arm. He doesn't resist and he doesn't help, just lies like a heavy dead cow.

There are no gurneys in Pathology. I slap him across the face, yelling "Randy! Randy! Get up!" Even now, even here, a small part of my mind thrills at hitting him.

His eyes open. For a second, I think he knows me. It goes away, then returns. He tries to get up. The effort is enough to let me hoist him over my shoulder in a fireman's carry. I could never have carried Jack, but Randy is much slighter, and I'm very strong.

But I can't carry him down three flights of stairs. I get him to the top, prop him up on his ass, and shove. He slides down one flight, bumping and flailing, and glares at me for a minute. "For . . . God's sake. . . Janet!"

His wife's name. I don't think about this tiny glimpse of his marriage.

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I give him another shove, but he grabs the railing and refuses to fall. He hauls himself—I'll never know how—back to a sitting position, and I sit next to him. Together, my arm around his waist, tugging and pulling, we both descend the stairs the way two-year-olds do, on our asses. Every second I'm waiting for the stairwell to blow up. Sean's gray face at dinner: *Fucking vigilantes'll get us all.*

The stairs don't blow up. The firedoor at the bottom gives out on a sidewalk on the side of the hospital away from both street and parking lot. As soon as we're outside, Randy blacks out.

This time I do what I should have done upstairs and grab him under the armpits. I drag him over the grass as far as I can. Sweat and hair fall in my eyes, and my vision keeps blurring. Dimly I'm aware of someone running toward us.

"It's Dr. Satler! Oh my God!"

A man. A large man. He grabs Randy and hoists him over his shoulder, a fireman's carry a lot smoother than mine, barely glancing at me. I stay behind them and, at the first buildings, run in a wide loop away from the hospital.

My car is still in the deserted driveway across the street. Fire trucks add their sirens to the noise. When they've torn past, I back out of the driveway and push my foot to the floor, just as a second bomb blows in the east wing of the hospital, and then another, and the air is full of flying debris as thick and sharp as the noise that goes on and on and on.

Three miles along the East River Road, it suddenly catches up with me. All of it. I pull the car off the road and I can't stop shaking. Only a few trucks pass me, and nobody stops. It's twenty minutes before I can start the engine again, and there has never been a twenty minutes like them in my life, not even in Bedford. At the end of them, I pray that there never will be again.

I turn on the radio as soon as I've started the engine.

"—in another hospital bombing in New York City, St. Clare's Hospital in the heart of Manhattan. Beleaguered police officials say that a shortage of available officers make impossible the kind of protection called for by Mayor Thomas Flanagan. No group has claimed credit for the bombing, which caused fires that spread to nearby businesses and at least one apartment house.

"Since the Centers for Disease Control's announcement last night of a widespread staphylococcus resistant to endozine, and its simultaneous release of an emergency counterbacteria in twenty-five metropolitan areas around the country, the violence has worsened in every city transmitting reliable reports to Atlanta. A spokesperson for the national team of pathologists and scientists responsible for the drastic countermeasure released an additional set of guidelines for its use. The spokesperson

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declined to be identified, or to identify any of the doctors on the team, citing fear of reprisals if—"

A burst of static. The voice disappears, replaced by a shrill hum.

I turn the dial carefully, looking for another station with news.

By the time I reach the west side of Emerton, the streets are deserted. Everyone has retreated inside. It looks like the neighborhoods around the hospital look. Had looked. My body still doesn't feel sick.

Instead of going straight home, I drive the deserted streets to the Food Mart.

The parking lot is as empty as everywhere else. But the basket is still there, weighted with stones. Now the stones hold down a pile of letters. The top one is addressed in blue Magic Marker: TO DR. BENNETT. The half-buried wine bottle holds a fresh bouquet, chrysanthemums from somebody's garden. Nearby a foot-high American flag sticks in the ground, beside a white candle on a styrofoam plate, a stone crucifix, and a Barbie doll dressed like an angel. Saran Wrap covers a leather-bound copy of *The Prophet.* There are also five anti-NRA stickers, a pile of seashells, and a battered peace sign on a gold chain like a necklace. The peace sign looks older than I am.

When I get home, Jack is still asleep.

I stand over him, as a few hours ago I stood over Randy Satler. I think about how Jack visited me in prison, week after week, making the long drive from Emerton even in the bad winter weather. About how he'd sit smiling at me through the thick glass in the visitors' room, his hands with their grease-stained fingers resting on his knees, smiling even when we couldn't think of anything to say to each other. About how he clutched my hand in the delivery room when Jackie was born, and the look on his face when he first held her. About the look on his face when I told him Sean was missing: the sly, secret, not-my-kid triumph. And I think about the two sets of germs in my body, readying for war.

I bend over and kiss Jack full on the lips.

He stirs a little, half wakes, reaches for me. I pull away and go into the bathroom, where I use his toothbrush. I don't rinse it. When I return, he's asleep again.

I drive to Jackie's school, to retrieve my daughter. Together, we will go to Sylvia Goddard's—Sylvia James's—and get Sean. I'll visit with Sylvia, and shake her hand, and kiss her on the cheek, and touch everything I can. When the kids are safe at home, I'll visit Ceci and tell her I've thought it over and I want to help fight the overuse of antibiotics that's killing us. I'll touch her, and anyone else there, and everyone that either Sylvia or Ceci introduces me to, until I get too sick to do that. If I get that sick. Randy said I wouldn't, not as sick as he is. Of course, Randy has lied to me before. But I have to believe him now, on this.

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I don't really have any choice. Yet.

A month later, I am on my way to Albany to bring back another dose of the counterbacteria, which the news calls "a reengineered prokaryote." They're careful not to call it a germ.

I listen to the news every hour now, although Jack doesn't like it. Or anything else I'm doing. I read, and I study, and now I know what prokaryotes are, and beta-lactamase, and plasmids. I know how bacteria fight to survive, evolving whatever they need to wipe out the competition and go on producing the next generation. That's all that matters to bacteria. Survival by their own kind.

And that's what Randy Satler meant, too, when he said, "My work is what matters." Triumph by his own kind. It's what Ceci believes, too. And Jack.

We bring in the reengineered prokaryotes in convoys of cars and trucks, because in some other places there's been trouble. People who don't understand, people who won't understand. People whose family got a lot sicker than mine. The violence isn't over, even though the CDC says the epidemic itself is starting to come under control.

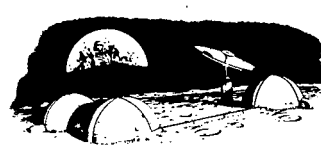
I'm early. The convoy hasn't formed yet. We leave from a different place in town each time. This time we're meeting behind the American Bowl. Sean is already there, with Sylvia. I take a short detour and drive, for the last time, to the Food Mart.

The basket is gone, with all its letters to the dead man. So are the American flag and the peace sign. The crucifix is still there, but it's broken in half. The latest flowers in the wine bottle are half wilted. Rain has muddied the Barbie doll's dress, and her long blonde hair is a mess. Someone ripped up the anti-NRA stickers. The white candle on a styrofoam plate and the pile of seashells are untouched.

We are not bacteria. More than survival matters to us, or should. The individual past, which we can't escape, no matter how hard we try. The individual present, with its unsafe choices. The individual future. And the collective one.

I search in my pockets. Nothing but keys, money clip, lipstick, tissues, a blue marble I must have stuck in my pocket when I cleaned behind the couch. Jackie likes marbles.

I put the marble beside the candle, check my gun, and drive to join the convoy for the city. ●



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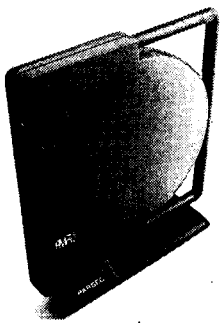

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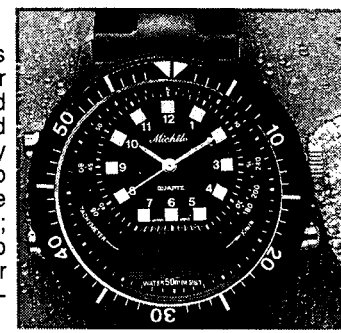

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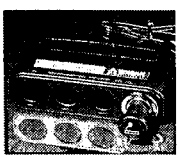

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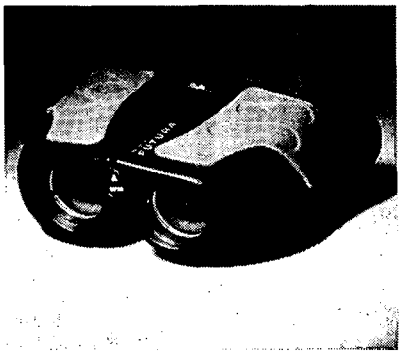

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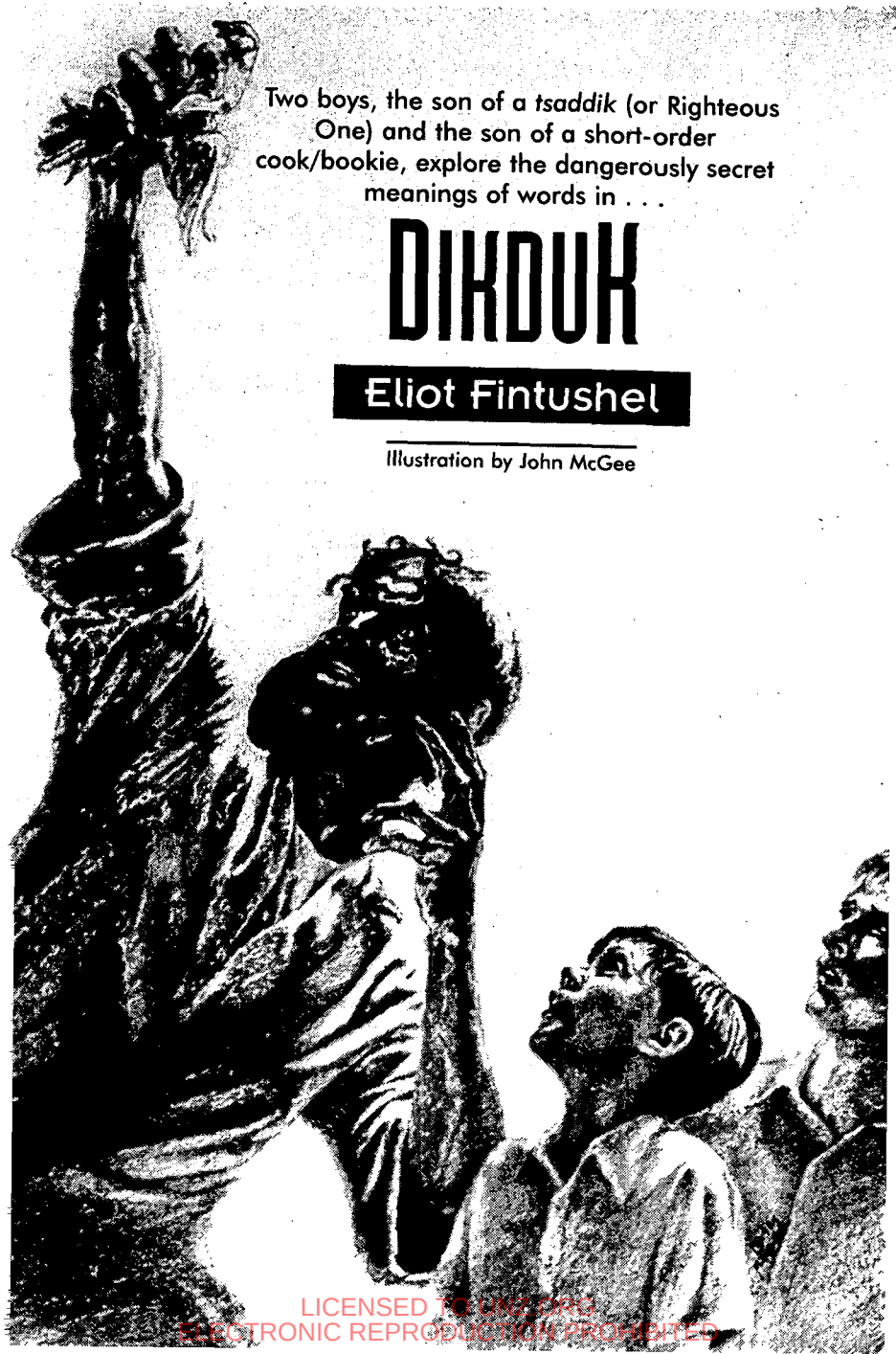
Two boys, the son of a *tsaddik* (or Righteous One) and the son of a short-order cook/bookie, explore the dangerously secret meanings of words in . . .

DIKDUK

Eliot Fintushel

Illustration by John McGee



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In the unspoken competition among the children at Temple *B'nai Israel* as to who was the most *frum*—ceremonially observant—Ishky Menken won hands down. His ancient father, Shmuel, was not only the synagogue's sexton, but a cabalist to boot.

It was Shmuel who led the old men in their mystical studies down in the temple's musty basement, with its moldering books and mildew, covered over by the smell of Lysol. It was Shmuel who blew the *shofar*—the ram's horn—on the Day of Atonement, to seal the Book of Life. It was Shmuel who mended the Rabbi's *tzitzit* and the coverlet for the Holy of Holies, the sacred scrolls in the Ark of the Covenant. And Zelafet Safim, the Chachem of Istanbul, was Shmuel Menken's house guest.

In all this, Ishky helped.

Who could match such piety? Certainly not me! What was *my* example? My father, Harry Suss, was a short-order cook at Mendel's Kosher Deli. Actually, he made book. Half the men who came to Mendel's for breakfast were attracted more by the trifecta than by the salami and eggs.

You think that was all? I wish! In fact, my father was one of the men who conducted "auction" on the High Holy Days. "Auction" was our orthodox Jewish equivalent of passing the plate. Since it was ritually forbidden to touch money or to write on the Holy Days, my father and his cronies took pledges from the faithful, and, selecting one of the prepared cards with a number corresponding to each member's pledge amount, attached it with a rubber band to the member's name card, and put them together in a little box, for future redemption.

In practice, however, depending on the schedule at the race tracks and how it happened to synchronize with our Jewish, lunar year, there were often two *extra* cards. These were prepared in a sort of pidgin Aramaic code which meant, on one card, "WIN," "PLACE," or "SHOW," and, on the other, the name of a horse.

The avowed purpose of "auction" (which, up until the time I was twelve, I believed was strictly a Yiddish word, and doesn't it sound like it?) was the awarding of ceremonial honors—such as opening the Ark, reading the holy text, or closing the Ark—to members who showed generosity in supporting our synagoguge. When my mother found out about Papa's scheme and reproached him for it, he showed her in his books how half of his take from the operation went back into the synagogue as a contribution—and he never even got to hold the Torah! What a *mensch!* All this I heard through the furnace grate from my room, where I was supposed to be asleep, but what I had really been doing was studying the *Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses* with a flashlight under my blanket. Papa and Mama's fights were just a sideshow.

But I was telling you about Ishky, the champion *tsaddik*, the righteous one, about how head-and-shoulders above us all he was when it came to heavenly matters. I played at his family's apartment sometimes, so I

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know. In those crowded four rooms, teeming with *chotchkes*, with *shmattes*, with *zachen*, with *stuff*, where his father, Shmuel the Cabalist, squinted and labored over the sewing machine—and this was America in the 1950s, not Czarist Russia—his father in the black yarmulke, with the fringes of his *tzitzit* peeking out over his belt, where nobody answered the phone on Saturday or touched a light switch, lifted a pencil, cut paper, or cooked, and where everything stopped three times a day for the recitation of the *Amidah*, Ishky and his baby sister played with me.

I liked the smell of that place: bubbling soup with chicken bones. Later, I learned, it's the fenugreek. I liked his mother's legs, thick as Samson's pillars, with frilly skirts that always showed when she brought us in something to eat—a cracker with chopped liver, a cookie, or sometimes even bone marrow, a delicacy we called *markh*.

Also, usually, though not lately, the Menkens' home was a haven of orderliness and calm. Lately, it was nearly as messy as *my* house. "Papa lost something," Ishky told me, and his mother added, "He won't say *what*." So Shmuel was constantly excavating for the lost article.

"Maybe it's under the planter," I'd say, or ". . . the red chair? . . . the umbrella stand? . . . What about the roll-top desk?" But as likely as not, the named object would *itself* be gone. The Menkens were spring cleaning, it seemed; Shmuel Menken was selling off superfluous items of furniture. And still the lost treasure, whatever it was, did not appear.

Shmuel's work table was still there, piled high with swatches and spindles and bobbins and shears, and other notions of the trade. One afternoon, Ishky and I were pitching baseball cards under it—our favorite stadium when Shmuel was at *shul* for his cabala group. "Sigalofski really *klopped* you one, didn't he, Michael?" Ishky asked me. He was getting back at me for winning his New York Yankees Team card.

"It wasn't so bad," I said. Actually, it was. Sigalofski, our Hebrew School teacher, a frustrated Yiddish author (and what Yiddish author isn't?) had the nasty habit of throwing books at children like me, who didn't pay attention. I had to go to Hebrew School because Sigalofski owed my father a hundred dollars, and this was the only way it could be paid off, quid pro quo. Things had gotten so bad for me there that I had developed this unconscious tick: I rocked back and forth at my desk as if I were praying at *shul*, a defensive maneuver against incoming biblioprojectiles. Sigalofsky eyed me warily for it, but didn't object—the semblance of piety silenced him.

"Don't give me that!" Ishky said. "I heard you grunt. So, what was inside your lesson book—a dirty picture?"

I was taking Ishky to the cleaners. I had his Roger Maris. I had his Yogi Berra. I had his New York Yankees Team card. There was this special way I had of snapping my middle finger against my thumb and *spinning* the cards toward the wall; even a *tsaddik* couldn't beat me.

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Exactly when Ishky was about to release his coveted Mickey Mantle rookie card, I said, "If you promise not to tell anybody, I'll show you what I was looking at," and his card landed a foot away from the wall. "But it's not a picture, Ishky."

Ishky didn't really care about the cards anyway. He nodded. I made sure to throw my pot-sweeping Red Sox Team card—it ended up leaning against the mopboard—and then to gather my winnings into my book bag and throw it over my shoulder. Then we ran outside—"Nowhere, Mama! We'll be right back! Michael wants to show me something!"—and Ishky followed me two blocks to the alley behind the RKO Palace Theatre, a defunct vaudeville venue that was now a movie house. I showed him how to climb up the fire escape and scramble across the gravel-covered roof to the top of the elevator shaft, where I kept my secret throne: a ragged lawn chair folded just out of sight in a narrow recess.

"Watch your step," I warned him. "The wood's no good over there." The boards covering the shaft were split and rotting. Most of the nails had popped out; some littered the tar paper underneath.

I pulled out my lawn chair and a cigar box that was hidden under it. Then I sat Ishky down in the lawn chair. "You're the first person I ever let sit there," I told him. "This is the throne that I rule the sun and the stars from, Ishky."

"Michael, you're *meshugge!*" he said. "When are you going to show me the picture?"

"It's not a picture," I said. "It's a *book*." I zipped open the book bag and, pushing aside my gum card boodle, pulled out the thin, green volume, handsomely grooved along the binding, that had been sharing my bed for several weeks, flashlit, and creeping into my notebooks at school. This, however, was my favored place to study and to experiment with the beloved book—the rooftop of the RKO, above the city and its houses, alone with my God.

"There are only *five*, you *shlemiel!*" Ishky laughed. "Pentacle, pentagram, Pentateuch! There aren't any sixth and seventh books of Moses! Where did you get that *farkakte* thing?"

"Don't laugh, Ishky," I said. "I found it in a used book store. I was looking for *Supermans* and stuff when I saw it in a cardboard box with a bunch of other books and some *Looks* and *Lifes*. It just came *in*, see? They didn't even price it yet! I got a deal. They don't know *what* a deal I got, Ishky! And I got the *Supermans*, too!"

"What a deal!" He couldn't stop laughing. "You got more deals in the cigar box, Mickey?"

So I showed him the virgin parchment I'd bought, ten square inches for a dollar fifty, mail order. Actually, it was a vegetable parchment imitation of the virgin parchment called for in the incantations and spells described in the *Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses*. I figured that would

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be good enough, if the other stuff was fairly authentic. I also showed him my peewee jackknife—it came from a plastic egg inside a bubble-gum machine—and the empty Heinz mustard jar I kept inside the cigar box along with the parchment, the knife, and some stale bread.

"The bread is for bait," I explained.

"Bait for what?" he asked me. Interested by my neat little knife, Ishky had stopped laughing for a moment.

"For doves," I said. "They come to get the bread crumbs, see? Then I sack them with my book bag."

"It'll make your bag stink," Ishky put in.

"No, it won't," I said. "You don't know anything about it. Then I'll cut their throats and bleed them into the mustard jar. Then I'm *ready*, boy."

"Ready for what?"

"Aciel, Mephistopheles, you *name* it! You make a circle of blood, you write some stuff on the paper, and you shout some stuff in Hebrew with all your heart and all your mind, and that's all there is *to* it, Ishky. The sky opens up and everything!"

Ishky said, "You haven't got a pen. You need a dip pen, and you haven't got one."

"I'm going to use my finger," I told him.

"You'll get a disease," Ishky said. "My father has an old dip pen somewhere. I'll get it for you, Mickey."

Everything was going along perfectly. I needed Ishky the Tsaddik to make everything work. I didn't know my Hebrew well enough, and *my* heart and mind weren't pure enough to raise even spirits of ammonia. "You can stand in the magic circle *with* me when I do it," I said. "It's all in here, Ishky." I tapped the book. I opened it to the diagram of the circle to draw for summoning Spirits of the Air. "You have to stand inside the circle or the spirits get you. As long as you stay inside and keep your mind pure, you're okay."

Ishky looked at the curious diagram with its mishmash of alchemical symbols, astrological signs, and Hebrew lettering in an archaic script. "This isn't the real thing," he announced.

"It is *too*," I said. "They didn't know what they were selling me!"

"I'll do it with you, though," Ishky said, "because if I don't, you'll get in some awful trouble for sure. You're a *shlimazl*, Mickey."

I'm *not* a *shlimazl*. I had most of Ishky's baseball cards in my book bag. I still had the New York Yankees Team picture, which a lot of people today would kill for. I had *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses*, and a throne from which I ruled the sun and the stars without adult intervention, including biblioprojectiles from Sigalofski. In addition, after Ishky, the genuine *shlimazl*, went home to supper, I stayed there on the roof of the RKO, and, that very evening, an autumn twilight so magically crimson that I felt as if I were being inhaled by God, along with the

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whole warm world, right up there into the Holy Presence, not ten yards from my lawn chair I found a pigeon that had brained itself against the skylight and was lying dead in a little pool of blood.

Between a pigeon and a dove, as far as I could see, nobody but a Talmudic scholar could quibble a difference, especially as concerns the blood, which, once out of the body, makes the same ink, I bet. This particular spill was viscous and red-brown. I scooped it into my Heinz jar and shook it up with some water standing in the gutter, lest it turn to pudding or powder before I could draw my circle. Then I tucked everything away and hightailed it home, where my mother was waiting for me, fuming.

"Where have you been?"

"On top of the RKO Palace, Mom, getting ready to invoke Mephistopheles."—No! I didn't say *that!* I said, of course, "Out," and I wolfed down my cold lamb chop and mashed potato while Papa handicapped his horses.

"Guess what? Menken placed a bet," he said. "Can you believe it?"

"Impossible!" my mother said. "The man's a *tsaddik*."

"The *tsaddik* blew two hundred and forty dollars," Papa told her. "He hung around Mendel's all afternoon, noshing, kibitzing, getting up the courage to place his bet—a very stupid one, if you want to know. Him and his new cabalist sidekick, the Turk with sidecurls, the one who snores on his sofa, Zelafet Safim."

I swallowed my last mouthful of cold potatoes and said, "He wasn't at Mendel's. He was at *shul*. Mrs. Menken said so." All of a sudden, it was bedtime.

But under the covers: Mephistopheles!

What a dope I am! Did I tell you about *dikduk* yet? Of course not! It's half-way through already, and the Spirits of the Earth and Air are clamoring between the floorboards, itching to explode into view, and you don't yet understand the main thing of all—*dikduk!*

Dikduk was Shmuel Menken's specialty. Old-timers used to come from all over and sleep on a pallet next to Ishky and his sister just so they could visit and confer with Shmuel on some deep question of *dikduk*. I would see them walk round and round the block in their ratty immigrant coats, waving their arms and talking an impenetrable mixture of Yiddish, Ladino, Russian, or German, and Hebrew, unraveling the secrets of the universe. Tears would flow, like drunken poets', or like lovers'. And Ishky and I would have to pitch cards at *my* house.

There are secret *meanings* to things. These meanings are hidden in the seams of things, like money sewn into a miser's jacket. God put them there for the *tsaddikim*, the saintly ones, and the *chachamim*, the wise ones, to figure out—guys like Shmuel Menken, for example. Take the

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first few words of the Bible: "In the beginning God created . . ." In the Hebrew, it's just three words. You take the last letter of each of these words and arrange them a certain way, and guess what? It spells the word for truth, *emes*, which means that everything in the Bible is true. That's *dikduk*.

Or take the last three letters of the best cards I won from Ishky that day—Roger Maris, Yogi Berra, and New York Yankees Team. The last letters spell out "Sam," which is what "Shmuel" is in English. There are three capital Y's, meaning how wise Shmuel was, and the M and R in Roger Maris, for "Mr.," because he was my friend Ishky's father. Like that. The one capital letter I left out, which I should have paid attention to if I'd had any *chachem* in me, which I didn't, and it would have avoided a bloody catastrophe for the entire congregation of B'nai Israel, not to mention the RKO Palace Theatre, and my eyesight—which I don't regret—was the capital letter N in the "New" of "New York." Meaning "NOT."

"Don't do it," the baseball cards were telling me, but I just couldn't hear them.

Red-eyed, with drooping lids and a hangdog look, Ishky collared me on the way to school. "Did you get the dove's blood?" he asked me.

"Of course," I said. "Everything on my end is ready. So, have you got the dip pen?"

"Yeah," he said, "but Mickey, you don't know what it cost me." And he started to cry.

That's when I taught Ishky the Tsaddik to play hooky. "C'mere," I said, and I grabbed his elbow. I turned him right around and took him back to my throne room, to the rooftop of the RKO, where we could have a moment of peace and sanity away from the world of grown-ups. I sat him down in my lawn chair, I fed him the Baby Ruth I was saving for lunch, and I showed him my new *Supermans*, including my favorite, where he tricks MXYZPTLK back into the fifth dimension by getting him to say his name backward.

"Hey!" says Ishky. "I know this one. I know *all* these! These are *mine*, that my Papa sold to the Used man."

"That's luck for you, Ishky," I said. "Now they're mine. I bought them. And you can read them again." After a few comics, I got this little story out of him at last:

"Papa's not so good, Mickey. He's all the time worrying. Late at night, if I get up to pee, he's awake. He keeps tearing the house apart looking for something he says he lost, and then he gets all quiet and sad to put it back together again. And you know what Mr. Safim does? He laughs at Papa!

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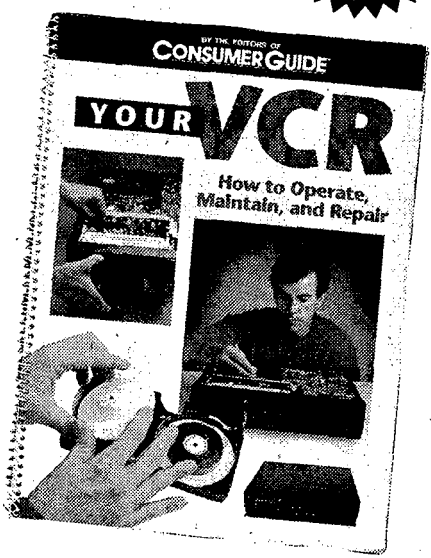

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"And Papa gets angry at Mama for nothing. At me, too. He never hits though, Mickey. You shouldn't think he hits.

"Well, when I went to get the dip pen—It's in the top dresser drawer under the mirror. He never uses it.—I saw some letters. There was one from the German Embassy. The Germans are giving him a hard time. We thought he'd get a lot of money back, you know, because of all the things they took away during the war. His family had a shop and everything, before the Nazis. And now that they passed reparations. . . . But they aren't gonna do it, the government I mean, the German one.

"Nobody gives you any money to sew the Rabbi's *tzitzit* or to teach them cabala or to blow shofar or to mend a suit when you can buy it cheaper off the rack at Sears Roebuck's. And when you can't see to sew, do you think they pay you better?"

"What do you mean?" I said. "Who can't see to sew?"

"Papa's going *blind*, that's what. That's the other thing I saw in the drawer, along with the pen, along with three different sizes of magnifying glass and a bunch of old pictures embroidered all round like a Star of David for a frame—a letter from the insurance company, Mickey. They don't want to pay nothing for a blind man, it says. He isn't covered. Can you believe it? And he's going blind!"

"You're smart, Ishky," I told him. "I couldn't make nothing of any letters like that. They'd be paper airplanes for me, boy."

"You don't get it," he said. He started crying again.

"Look, Ishky," I said, "don't get like that. Everything's gonna be okay. I'm telling you, Mephistopheles is gonna *fix* it, or one of those other guys. I got the book and the blood and the paper. You got the pen, and you're practically a Messiah anyway, goshdamn you. . . ." He laughed. ". . . So we're all *set*, see? Here. I'll even give you the book and all the stuff. You can copy it better. Don't let anybody see it though, or I'll kill you dead, *tsaddik* or not."

I gave him the book and the stuff in the cigar box, everything except the little knife, which I kept, and the crumbs, which I threw away, because we already had the dove's blood, more or less. "I'm no Messiah," Ishky said. "I'm no *tsaddik*, Mickey." I knew better.

"I'll meet you here at midnight," I said. "Don't worry about getting caught. Once we've got those spirits doing our bidding, they'll fix everything. Okay?"

"Okay."

But when I handed Ishky the book, I felt like I was giving my heart and stomach away. I didn't like not having it under the covers that night. That meant that my parents' argument occupied Ring Number One.

"I want you to get a regular, honest job, Harry. Is that too much to ask?"

"So I should be a tailor like Shmuel the Tsaddik?"

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"So what would be so bad?"
"And a *shnorrer* and a *shikker* too?"
"Harry, please! He doesn't beg. He doesn't drink."
"Hah! If you don't know any better, I won't tell you."

Sigalofski's Malediction

At this point in my story, before anything really terrible has occurred, I would like to insert a little something for the record. This is the curse that Hershel Sigalofski laid upon me in a voice so nasal and shrill that it gave three children their first taste of migraine and caused fifteen bottles of Slivovitz in the liquor store below to spontaneously shatter, littering the shelves with broken glass and momentarily rendering the air itself forty proof. The occasion for this harangue, punctuated by the usual biblioprojectiles in Yiddish, Hebrew, and Aramaic, was my referring, in answer to a question on the Book of Genesis, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as "guys":

> "Michael Suss, you have the brains of a strangled chicken and a heart made of chopped liver and goose fat! Who ever told you that you were a Jew? Was it for *you* that God made the rainbow and parted the Red Sea and brought water up out of a stone?
>
> "May the Spirits of the Earth, Air, Water, and Fire, the Seraphim and Cherubim and Heavenly Hosts strike me and hurtle me down into the bottomless pit if I, Hershel Sigalofski, son of Seymour, son of Ruben, ever mistake *you* for a thinking, feeling human being, a descendant of the family of Adam and Moses and David the King, made in the image of God Almighty, with a capacity for holiness, justice, righteousness, or mercy.
>
> "Get out of my classroom and out of my sight, and don't come back until Monday, with a note from your mother!"

I ran out crying.

Just before midnight, sleepier than I had ever been in my entire life, I snuck out of my room and was on my way out the door when Papa snagged me. "Shh!" he said. "Don't wake your mama. You going out somewhere?"

"Yeah."

"Here's a little something. Stay out of trouble, huh?"

I took the little foil package he handed me, thanked him, and skedaddled to the RKO. Ripping the edge of the foil as I ran, I was disappointed to discover that "Rameses" was not a brand of chocolate after all; it was

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some kind of rubber thing, the use of which I would not learn for another year or so.

He was crazy like that, my father. That was his idea of being a good parent. I stuffed the condom in my pocket for my mother to find in the laundry a week later. (Lucky I was an invalid by then!)

Ishky hadn't arrived at the RKO yet. Alone on the roof, by the light of the gibbous moon and the spill from the floodlights, which were mounted like gargoyles on the edge of the gutter, I unfolded my throne and waited. Pigeons circled over the roof, cooing, even at night, casting moon shadows against the elevator shaft and on the walls of adjoining buildings.

Just a little ill at ease, I drew a circle in the gravel around my lawn chair, using a broken piece of electrical conduit. It was just a groove in the stones, but it comforted me a little. I recited one of the protecting phrases from the *Sixth and Seventh: "Lo al yidai vahalayim rayim!"* That is, "Not through severe bodily sufferings and malignant diseases!" It was all I could remember. Then I sat down, and at once fell asleep.

I dreamed of letters and numbers in geometric arrays, each one vividly alive, with its own fascinating story and its own unique sorrow. The letter Z, for example, was mourning the loss of a serif; the poor thing had become involved with malevolent, deceitful numerals, and had been lured to its destruction in an unending series of periods.

I woke with a start. When Ishky arrived, it wasn't Ishky—it was Zelafet Safim, the Menkens' boarder. He stood over me, moonlit, grinning through his big, black, curly whiskers. His fingernails were so long they were starting to curl. That ratty black cloth coat of his stank of napthalene and match heads. Did I mention that I was frightened? Without thinking, I touched my thumbs and forefingers together, making a diamond shape between my hands and fanning out the other fingers in the mystic sign I'd read about under the covers.

Safim laughed. "You're a Cohen?" he said.

"No," I said, "a Suss."

Safim laughed again. " 'Suss' means horse," he said. "Why does the horse make the sign of the Cohens, of the Holy Priests?"

"I'm not doing anything wrong," I said. "Where's Ishky?"

Safim ignored my question. "You know, horsey," he said, "a man has to be forty years old and to have studied the Holy Books all his life before he can even open the cabala. You've got a lot of nerve, little horsey."

"I never opened any cabala."

Safim started strolling around the throne just at the edge of my little dry moat, the one I'd scraped in the gravel. I had to keep turning my head to follow him. He said, "You know what I'm talking about. The funny book. The one you found in a cardboard box."

"Ishky told you!"

"Ishky told me! Ishky the Tsaddik! Ishky the *Meshiach ben David!*

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You think he's the Messiah, horsey? Ishky is no Messiah. His father too, he's no Messiah."

"Leave me alone. What are you telling me for?"

Zelafet Safim stepped back toward the outcropping of the elevator shaft where I had stashed my mystic goods. "Come here, horsey, and I'll show you something interesting," he said.

"I want to go home," I said.

"Okay. That's good, too. Go home. Get out. Go to your *gonif* father. Maybe he'll give you some more rubbers."

"How did you know about that?" I said. I stayed right where I was, in the circle, in the throne. I was beginning not to like this guy.

"Come on," he said. "You like tricks? I'll show you a trick." Without taking his eyes off me, he thrust one hand straight up toward the moon, letting the threadbare coat sleeve fall to his elbow. His ugly, pale fingers had long nails, like little scimitars; the exposed forearm was scrawny as a chicken bone. In a sudden, savage sweep, Safim grabbed a pigeon right out of the air. It was pure white. I don't want to tell you exactly how he killed it, but when he was finished, he dropped it onto the gravel in two pieces. "You need ink, horsey? Here's ink. Come get ink."

Down in the alley, someone was running, then clamoring up the fire escape. "Mickey! Mickey!" It was my Ishky. He was panting as he cried, climbing to the rooftop, "I'm sorry, Mickey. Papa took the stuff. He made the pentacles and the letters and signs. He drew the circle right by the sewing table. I think he's going nuts, Mickey!"

I saw Ishky's cherubic little head appear above the gutter, and then he stopped cold. "Mr. Safim!" he said.

"It's the horsey's book." Safim said darkly. "The horsey bought and paid for it. It doesn't belong to your papa any more. It belongs to the horsey, so I come to the horsey, no matter who mumbles and scribbles in blood."

"You! *Papa* brought you here," Ishky said to Safim. "Now I get it! Papa brought you here. Now he's trying to get rid of you."

"A *chachem!*" Safim sneered. "Your papa wanted me to fix his eyes. But then he didn't like the price."

"What price?" I said. Ishky was climbing carefully onto the roof.

"*His* eyes," said Safim, and he pointed at Ishky.

"A transplant?" I said.

"A transplant!" laughed Safim. "Call it a transplant, if you want. But your papa didn't like the deal, Ishky *Meshiach*, so he tried to make money another way."

"The bets!" I said. "My father said he placed one."

"Poor Shmuel doesn't know his horses," Safim said.

"My Papa is getting rid of you," Ishky told Safim. Ishky came into the circle and stood beside me. "He found his book again. Right this minute,

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he's shouting the holy names with all his heart and all his mind. He's holding the parchment written in blood, and he's standing in the magic circle."

"*His* book?" I stammered. "What do you mean, *his* book?"

"Yeah, Mickey," Ishky said, "just like it was my *Supermans* you showed me. It was Papa who sold them to the bookstore in the box with the *Looks* and the *Lifes*, but the book must have fallen in by mistake."

"By mistake!" Safim snorted. He was having himself a good laugh.

Suddenly Safim stopped laughing. He began to shiver. He turned up his collar and raised his shoulders practically to his ears, like a snowbound traveler. "Come here," he said to me.

"Don't leave the circle, Mickey," Ishky shouted.

Safim seemed to grow tired. He was leaning back against the edge of the shaft, giving his weight to it more and more. But he could still spit. "Sure thing," he said. "Look out for yourselves—*let* Shmuel send me away. You know, Shmuel called me here because he's poor and going blind. Now, how will he turn a buck if I go?

"What do you think, Ishky, will he get a good price on his sewing table? Hey, little Mickey, do you think your Papa will let Shmuel win some bundle on the races?"

I said, "Can you really fix him, Mr. Safim? Can you keep Mr. Menken from going blind?"

"Shut up, Mickey," Ishky said. "Don't talk to him. He's a liar."

Safim's shaking was getting worse. He didn't seem as formidable as the *Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses* had declared a dark spirit should be: "black and black and black, stormy and turbid, a crushing malevolence." He looked like an old man with the DT's. His voice quivered when he said, "Sure I can fix him. I can keep him from going blind. But *some*body's got to pay me. I've got expenses like everybody else."

"Somebody's got to go blind?" I said.

"Shut up!" Ishky told me. "Shut up! Shut up!"

"Yeah. Step out of the circle, *tsaddik*. Save the poor tailor."

"No!" Ishky shouted. I got up and pushed Ishky aside. I stepped out of the circle. Zelafet Safim literally jumped for joy. His arms and legs shot out like beams of light from a sunburst. With his shaggy head, they formed a pentacle.

"Come!" he said.

I moved toward him, mesmerized. When I had nearly reached Safim, Ishky burst out of the circle and fell against him. The rotten beams behind the old man gave way. They splintered and he collapsed backward. He was laughing! Ishky scrambled back as Safim flailed about, crashing first through the splintering wood and then through a section of glass behind it. The glass shattered, and Safim was thrown backward

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into the shaft. His laughter echoed hideously as he fell. Then the sickening thud and the denouement of glass and broken boards clattering to the bottom.

It was only then that I felt the searing pain in my face. Slivers of glass had rained on my head and upper body, lacerating me in a dozen places. All I could see was blood, and after that, nothing. Ishky was crying, "Oh God! Oh my God! Poor Mickey! What have we done?"

Well, let's not be so melodramatic as Ishky on the roof of the RKO. It's true, I was blinded, but, believe me, I manage. I am sexton at *B'nai Israel*—a cushy job, if somewhat impecunious. Everyone has been very nice, and through the generosity of the Menkens, I have Braille texts and other necessities of my work, not to mention the trust fund.

You see, Safim's death brought to public attention the numerous code violations of the RKO Palace Theatre, the "attractive hazard" of its rooftop being the least of them. The place was closed down for almost a year. (What did I care? I can't see movies!) Then, through a happy conjunction of the RKO's liability insurance and their public relations requirements, the large sum of money released by the auditors on the occasion of Safim's death, like winged seeds from an autumnal puffball, wound up in the lap of Shmuel Menken—Zelafet Safim had no known relatives, and the RKO *had* to make amends to *someone*. So I wound up with a bit of it.

Shmuel Menken, feeling guilty of course, put some of the boodle in a trust fund for me. My father became its custodian, relieving him of the necessity of cooking short orders or conducting auction. That's probably what saved my parents' marriage—a mixed blessing.

The Menkens left town before Passover. Shmuel never did go blind, though I don't think he needed to mend *tzitzit* any more either. And if you think all this is just some fantasy I dreamed up to dramatize my accident, go look at the north wall of *B'nai Israel* in Syracuse, New York. There's a stained glass window near the Holy Ark, they tell me, that was paid for by Shmuel Menken, God knows why. A memorial.

On it, in ornate Hebrew calligraphy, written in the ancient fashion, without vowels, is the name Zelafet Safim, so: "ZLFTSFM." Of course, only those versed in the sacred science of *dikduk* would ever think to read that memorial in the opposite direction: "MFSTFLZ"—the Prince of Darkness. ●

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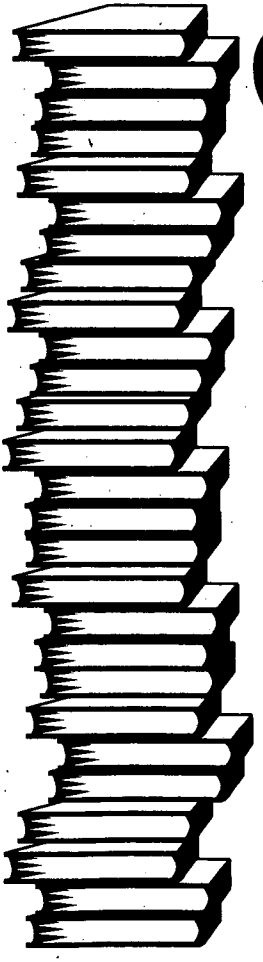

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G. David Nordley

ALICE'S ASTEROID

Ever since he first read Isaac Asimov's *Lucky Starr and the Pirates of the Asteroids,* G. David Nordley has wanted to write just such an adventure tale. But, if new materials and robotics are making heavy metals obsolete, what would an asteroid pirate try to pirate? Mr. Nordley's unnerving answer is that for those who lust for power, a child's mind is the most valuable commodity of all . . .

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

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Being part of a legend is okay, after the fact, but, as I look back on what we belters have come to know as "The Battle of Alice's Asteroid," I wouldn't recommend the process to anyone. I paid for my fame, not just with wounds and suffering, but, in the end, with my heart twice over. Times are changing now, thanks in part to Alice, and it has come time to take care of some unfinished business; they say confession is good for the soul. Especially when you might be forgiven.

The tale you know was mostly cover story and media hype; we did not fight off a squadron of space pirates; it was just one ship. They weren't your usual rock vultures, exactly, but something with a different, more sinister, appetite. And the part about Shan Krug wounding four of them before being fatally wounded herself . . . it didn't happen quite that way, but, as she was beyond retaliation, it was useful for people to think that she did all the shooting. So the hype is wrong, but what really happened was quite enough for anyone.

Alice's Asteroid isn't exactly a central node of the asteroid belt economy, but it was, and is, self-sufficient, and supplied its share of local data on the solar wind and the various pebbles that drifted within range of its laser strobes. At the time of the "battle," it had been drifting through the Vesta association for the past dozen years, and was approaching a nodal conjunction with the "Bright Rock"—then only two day's journey prograde, with a magsail beam boost.

The proprietor, Al Montoya, is a diamond sculptor of some ability, more ingenuity, and surpassing industry, who could barter his endobeam deposition creations for various goodies beyond the basic trade allocation rendered from the IPA admin node. For instance, the soap dishes in the bathrooms of the *Ceres Regency* are Al's work, and, as a result, his freezer contained delicacies unknown to most belters. So, in better times, I looked forward to a trip out there from Vesta.

The asteroid was named for Al's late wife and his thirteen-year-old daughter, who they called "Alice Two" or "Alice, too," depending on the circumstances. Of course, in the three years since her mother's death she insisted that everyone call her "just Alice." And, of course, people forgot.

"Alice Two Montoya," Al shouted as Shan contacted him on approach with a shuttle full of groceries, tools, spare parts, and me. He hadn't seen me yet.

Shannon Krug was our shuttle pilot, and the reason for Al's excitement.

Of twelve hundred Vesta region shuttle pilots then, only a couple of hundred were women. Such was the influence of the paternalism of The New Reformation at its zenith. Shan fought that, and had made it a point to get Alice's Asteroid on her route ever since Alice died. Alice Two idolized her.

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"Ho, Shan," Al bellowed in a resonant liquid baritone, verging on basso. *"Alice Two Montoya!* Shan's here!" His voice echoed back from the hall connecting the six rooms of their home, which were laid out on one side of a hundred-meter radius latticework wheel that rotated in the second largest crater of the asteroid. Alice Two answered in a medium-high clear, confident tone that made its owner sound five years older than she was. I stepped into the viewfield and waved at Al from behind Shan.

He scowled at me. Well, that was to be expected. I didn't have good news and he knew it.

Their station crater had become the south pole of the asteroid a week after Al turned on his habitat centrifuge because the asteroid's original rotation was either chaotic or nonexistent, depending on whether you ask a mathematician or a miner. Most asteroids spin in about six hours, so this one must have taken a recent hit; and, indeed, the polar crater seemed sharp-edged and smooth-floored fresh.

Anyway, with Al's habitat going one way, the asteroid went the other. Al set up his cargo launcher on the new equator, and had given it a little help when North passed near the ecliptic pole. Its new rotation combined with its orbital motion produced a traditional twenty-four-hour day. A simple pressure-stiffened bubble mirror on the mooring mast provided sunlight at one-sixth earth equatorial maximum. That, allowing for atmospheric absorption, provided about the same amount of sunny warmth as an Oslo winter noon—or Al's reaction to my unfortunate duty.

The wheel was a circular cage of aluminum trusswork, containing the big curved sausage of Al's habitat on one side, with environmental equipment, photovoltaic cells, and a pair of weights on rails with which Al's computer, "Alexander The Great," kept his empire in balance on the other.

Alexander was the Montoyas' cyberservant, nursemaid, and general factotum, and he was now busy guiding my IPA shuttle to the mooring mast. It wasn't despun—the once-a-day rotation wasn't enough to mess with at a three-meter-radius—the computers simply negotiated a touch of pitch-up gyro at the moment of contact and the mast bent a little away from center to adjust its center of gravity.

"Elegant, if eccentric," Shan remarked. "This rock is full of simple solutions to things that are just full of mechanical complexity elsewhere. This guy is special."

"Please don't make it any harder on me," I snapped, a little surprised at my own irritation.

"Yeah, I know. You're just the messenger. Does Kerri know what you're doing?"

My wife, back at Vesta, and Shan were in the same bridge club; so if Kerri didn't know what I was doing, I was being served notice that she soon would. We weren't living together any longer; too many different

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interests, different passions. Tired of Kerri's social whirl and wanting to cut down on my daily commute to a job that requires two or three face-to-face meetings a day, I'd taken an apartment close to the government complex. The nostalgia of twenty years of memories and Shan's cheery efforts kept Kerri and me from formalizing the split, but, truth be known, I'd developed a liking for Shan, bright-eyed, capable, and thoughtful, while Kerri spent her time on social frivolity.

I grunted a noncommittal response and headed out the hatch as soon as the good-to-go tone sounded. Shan followed, grabbing my helmet and briefcase. Physically, Shan was stouter than Kerri, with well muscled, unadorned hands and indifferent to fashion; a shipsuit-and-coveralls person. She handed me the helmet, and my hand brushed hers briefly. I smiled a sheepish thanks. As a glorified social worker, I didn't get out that much. She reached for my kit, with all the stuff we sometimes need to use on an uncooperative "client." She must have thought I'd forgotten it. I wish I could have.

"I'll leave that. Too damn bureaucratic and insensitive. This is going to be rough enough."

She nodded, the shuttle doors cycled shut behind us, and we pulled ourselves down the inside of the hollow mast toward the asteroid's surface. There was a counterweighted elevator cab that ran around the outside of the mast where it passed through the wheel. We went in through double doors in the mast tube and felt our weight build up as centrifugal force took the elevator out to the wheel and the Mars normal gravity most belters used.

A clank indicated that we'd engaged the wheel air lock, the double doors opened again, and I was face to face with Al. A burly, straight-backed old guy with a walrus mustache, he was barefoot and his belly folded over stained work shorts, with various tools hanging here and there. He usually had a smile and a twinkle in his eye, but without those, he could look as cold and forbidding as doom itself—and that's what I saw as the door opened.

He didn't waste time getting down to it. "Shan," he nodded a greeting. "Dr. Wade. You've come to take Alice Two." There was no handshake.

I nodded gravely. "I'm sorry, Al. The board didn't want to make an exception. That makes it easier for them to insist on children's rights in other cases, where it's really needed."

"Zeke, you don't take children from two-parent families," he grumbled.

"We have lots of children from two-parent families at the central school."

"Yeah, sent there by choice. Well I don't choose, and neither does Alice."

"I'm sorry. It's the law."

"LAW?" he bellowed. "Goddamn New Reformationist-dominated IPA

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charter-screwing *illegal* law, and that only because that stealth candidate, what's his face—Adam Solacus—got on the board without telling people what his true colors were."

I shrugged my shoulders. A man with the name "Solacus" wasn't exactly a stealth candidate. Even though he didn't run on a theocratic platform, he'd taken the surname of the New Reformation's founder, Thomas Solacus, who'd supposedly discovered those diamond-coated tablets near the geological formation known as the Face of Mars. Adam's sympathies had been no secret.

"Jim Dolen isn't New Reformation," I argued. A quiet, careful man who had pioneered a number of productive rocks, the board chairman had steered a careful middle course between the traditional belt libertarians and the God squad. " . . . and some of their reforms have real merit."

"Crap," Al fumed. "Chairman Dolen's spineless. He waffles this way and that with all the resistance of a wet noodle. That old hack is just handing things over to those busybodies. Why can't they mind their own Goddamn business?"

Shan snorted. "Brainwashing people *is* their Goddamn business. It's for our own good—they're going to make us happy by making us live the way their God intended people to live, by being efficient cogs in the great design. What *we* believe doesn't seem to matter very much."

I shot a look at Shan—I hadn't really known she was so political. "Careful where you say that kind of thing," I cautioned, surprised at myself. Had we descended that far into fear?

"Zeke," Al grumped, "you used to be decent folks. Why the hell are you going along with this?"

"Because," I said, "as long as we and people like us don't quit, the civil service is still part of the Interplanetary Association. And the school is still IPA. We can drag it out, bore them, obfuscate them. Wait for the next election. But until then, we have to do our job and not give the board an excuse to fire us."

Alice interrupted us then, a grease-smudged, dirty-blonde, near-naked budding thirteen-year-old ball of energy who bolted past her unsuspecting father from the entryway like a moonball guard and latched onto Shan with an arms-and-legs hug and a loud kiss.

"Auntie Shan! I didn't know you were coming! Wait 'til you see what I've done with the rockhopper! Doubled its range with magnetic shocks! Ten gees! Come on, you won't believe it!"

"Alice," her father grumbled. "You've gotta wear a shipsuit in the elevator cab. Always." He looked me in the eye, and sighed. "All right, then, come in. We shouldn't be discussing this in the cab lock anyway." He stepped aside and we entered.

Alexander closed the double doors behind us and Shan gave me an embarrassed grin and a quick wave as Alice Two pulled her down the

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corridor toward the habitat's mechanical shop. Al smiled and waved back, then turned to glower at me.

This, I thought, was not going to be easy at all. We stared at each other for a while—neither of us wanted us to start talking. Finally, I started in the middle.

"Lack," I said, "of appropriate female socialization is what they will call it."

Al took a breath and started to work himself up into a tirade. "For all the . . . "

I raised a hand as if to ward off the invective. "I know Alice wouldn't have raised her any differently. But, Alice, you'll have to admit, was an unusual woman, uh, in her love of mechanical things and her complete disregard for social conventions. . . ."

I stopped, disgusted at what I'd just said. Alice Montoya-Smith had been everything I'd wanted in a wife that Kerri wasn't, except that I doubt Alice would have ever hosted a department cocktail party in a slinky black dress. The absurdity of that thought brought a smile back to my face.

Al frowned. "Since when did social convention have anything to do with living in space?"

"Uh, well, out here, maybe nothing. Look, Al, what happens when Alice Two gets exposed to boys? The New Reformationist kids are raised to believe in male-on-top."

Al gave me a cold smile; eyes narrowed, just a slight upward twitch of the ends of his moustache. "Zeke, Alice Two is already pressing within a hundred newtons of her mom's personal best, and she's only twelve! And she's great at rock-skeet, too; hit forty straight at a hundred meters on manual. Any young 'lance of God' with ideas beyond her intentions would get a pretty rude surprise."

I winced thinking about it. The most virulent of New Reformationist youth movement's boys had their own name for themselves, unofficial, but the source of smiles from their fathers. Those kind of bullies wouldn't be expecting resistance from a young girl. But Al's late wife had placed third in the 2378 Vesta weightlifting handicap, four places ahead of me, and now Alice Two was just as strong. Someone could get killed.

"Al, someone's got to teach her other ways of handling that kind of situation. Gentler ways. Feminine ways. Or someone could get hurt."

"Why? Why should *she* have to be gentle? You're not turning sexist on me, are you? You know what Alice thought about that stuff."

"I know, Al, I know. It's just that, well, fashions change." And I looked down on Kerri for being fashionable? What was I saying? "Uh, with the New Reformationists moving in and all, well, people are going back to more, well, classic styles of dress and behavior."

Al scowled. "Crap."

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"Don't get me wrong. Alice Two can be what she wants to be. It's just that she might want to know how to get along. She should have a choice about just how far out of step she wants to be. That's getting to be more and more important."

Al slammed a hand against the bulkhead. "Vacuum dust! Why . . . "

Alexander the Great's warning tones interrupted him. "We have unannounced visitors. They apparently are stealth-capable, radar shows nothing. But they passed in front of the sun's corona and I saw the shadow. I'm afraid they're docking now."

Huh? There were upward of three million people in the belt now, all but a hundred thousand in the ring colonies around the major asteroids. But that hundred thousand contained some of the weirdest of the weird. There had been four or five break-ins in the last year at isolated stations like Al's, mostly taking life support stuff, but there had been one sexual assault. One, out of three million people, but it had everyone on edge.

And the way these visitors had snuck up screamed danger.

"Alexander, have everyone meet at the living room," Al snapped, all business.

The lights flickered.

"Alexander?" Al called. The computer didn't answer, and I heard the sound of motors winding down. The station suddenly was deadly silent.

"Fans are off. Lights are on emergency," Al muttered, gesturing to a wall panel with two red telltales. It was an ancient piece of equipment one wouldn't find in most modern stations, an analog device completely separate from the main cybersystem. "They've cut the power."

There was a loud boom on the cab wall. We froze. I regretted not bringing my kit.

Another boom echoed through the now-silent station. "Open up or breathe vacuum," a muffled voice said, as if a helmet had been pressed up against the bulkhead.

Al leaned over and whispered in my ear. "Get your helmet on and go find Shan and Alice Two. Get them dressed. I have to let these Yahoos in, but I'm gonna do it slowly."

I grabbed my helmet and Al gave me a gentle shove down the corridor.

I found Shan and Alice in the shop surrounded by equipment.

"Someone showed up unannounced and wants to get in," I whispered. "They threatened to dump our air, so Al says we'd best suit up."

Alice Two's eyes got very wide.

Shan didn't have her helmet—it must have been back at the lock and I hadn't thought to look for it. I looked down the corridor—we could hear muffled voices.

The side of the shop opposite the work bench was floor to ceiling shelving covered with wire mesh retaining doors. Alice Two flipped one of

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these up and pulled out a pair of helmets, and gave one to Shan. "That was Mom's. Looks like you've got close to the same neck."

Shan took the helmet. Alice must have been five centimeters shorter than Shan, but she'd had a weightlifter's build. Alice Two pulled a ship-suit out of her helmet and started rolling it on.

The voices grew louder. There were shouts.

Shan looked at me, eyes glistening, mouth set hard. "Go help him," she whispered. "I need to talk to Alice. Try to prepare her for . . . in case. . . . "

I nodded and went out the door, which shut behind me. With almost everything being made by robot labor now, there are only a few things which would make breaking into an asteroid station worthwhile, and then only to an unbalanced mind. Trouble was, the New Reformation had unbalanced a lot of minds lately.

There were three of them, all tall, all male, all clothed from head to toe in black cloth which must have been thin enough around the eyes, nose, and mouth to allow breath and vision. There was one exception to the blackness—a small silver hand, four fingers together, thumb outstretched, placed on the left shoulder.

The Right Hand of The Face of Mars. These weren't simple raiders.

I'd heard rumors that the New Reformation had a secret society, aimed at scaring people into compliance, but up to then I'd dismissed them as alarmist propaganda. The New Reformation had evoked an immediate negative knee-jerk reaction from various groups of libertarian eccentrics on society's edge, a reaction that with its exaggerated forecasts of theocracy and doom had bothered most of us live-and-let-live types almost as much as the sanctimoniousness prudery of their antagonists.

But what I was looking at now was no fantasy.

"You have no right!" Al shouted. "Get off my asteroid, *now*."

"We want to see the *girl*," one of them said, in a deep bass—rich, modulated, and resonant with authority—but there was no way to tell which of them was speaking.

"I don't want Alice to see *you*."

The Hand in the center made an almost imperceptible nod of his head, and the other two quickly stepped forward and grabbed Al's arms.

Then the middle one slugged Al in the stomach.

Al hardly noticed. He brought his arms together, carrying the two toughs like a couple of hand weights, and slammed the three of them together.

The middle one bounced back and pulled a gun. Al froze.

"Stop!" I heard myself yell.

The Hand turned and I found myself looking down the muzzle. He shot. I felt a deep stabbing pain in my chest. Then, very, very quickly I felt nauseous and weak. My limbs gave out and I slumped to the floor.

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This was the part where, in the videos, you get locked in a room alone, get free of your bonds somehow, and then either blow up the bad guys or call the cops.

The trouble with that was that Al and I got hit with a class A selective voluntary muscle relaxant. Standard government load; I knew because that's what I had in my gun that I'd left back in my kit on our spacecraft. I couldn't move any major muscle groups except around my jaw—and then only in connection with talking, it seemed. It acted on a specific part of the brain, I recalled.

Unfortunately, it left my sensory nerves intact; I could do nothing about all those little discomforts you feel when you've been sitting a while. An itch went unitched. A fold of cloth under my thigh went unsmoothed. A minor cramp went unrubbed. My head rubbed against the corridor wall in exactly the same spot. Breathing was difficult. I'd gotten, I realized, a double dose. One more would likely be fatal.

The Hand came back up the corridor from the equipment room. "Gone. Where are they, infidel?"

"I don't know," I wheezed. "Look, I'm not local. I'm with Node human services, just out here to take the young lady to public school according to a law that was supported by your . . . organization."

"Oh? Well that's too bad. It's a little too late for this infidel to think of cooperating now. The propaganda he's been putting on Commonboard has been just a little too offensive to certain people. Our supporters will make their own public declarations of faith when it suits *our* purposes."

"Propaganda? Declarations of Faith?" I strained to look at Al through the corners of my eyes. *You old fool,* I wanted to say.

Al grunted. "I gotta right to say what I want about those stealth . . . " The lights seemed to flicker slightly and Al stopped then, realizing, I thought, that it would be only a matter of time before his daughter was caught. "Wade . . . " he said.

My last name. The Hands looked at me. But that wasn't why Al used my name. No, he was signaling me. But about what? The flicker? Emergency power would last only so long. But if anything, the lights were brighter. Was the drug affecting my perception, or . . . "

"Okay, Ippie," The Hand snarled, "again. Where are they?" Ippie meant me, for IPA.

"I really don't know. I just got here myself."

The goon put his boot under my chin and pressed a little, until I gagged. Then he let up. At least my head fell into a different position. Fortunately, though you would have had a hard time convincing me of it at the time, I indeed had no idea of where Shan and Alice Two had gone. Al might have had a better idea, but if so, his will power was a little better than mine.

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Then The Hand kicked Al in the gut. Al slid prone and his eyes stared at the ceiling, vacantly.

The Hand didn't seem to notice. "Old man, tell me, *now.*"

I think that was when I gave up on moderate politics. The lights flickered again, clearly, and I thought I heard a fan start and stop. But The Hand didn't notice; he was getting set to stomp Al again. I had to say something to distract him.

"Look, I'm taking the girl back to Vesta anyway. What do you need her for?"

"We need to put the fear of God into her. And that shuttle pilot's been involved in the underground. She's going to have an accident."

Shan? Underground? Accident? I thought furiously; but the only thing I could do was talk.

"That might be a little less obvious," I hazarded, "if it happened on the shuttle. I could help."

"Go on," The Hand replied in a neutral voice, not seeming to regard me as a committed enemy.

"I could say she tried to kidnap Alice, then shoot her." My heart wasn't affected by the drug, and I could feel it pick up the pace. I had him hooked; if he would only ask the right question.

"With what?" he asked.

"I've got a Pearydome five millimeter compact in my kit. Government rounds. We need them because, if you can imagine, some of these isolated asteroid stations are crazier than *this* one. Neat little thing, balanced just like their rock skeet model. You like guns?"

"Maybe it would be a good idea to shoot the infidel bitch with yours. What's your code?"

Maybe there *is* a God. Thank you, God. I spoke the numbers, slowly and clearly, then repeated.

"I got it the first time," the thug snorted.

Al moved and groaned. Shit. I prayed silently for Al's brain to kick in before he said anything.

"Three," The Hand barked to one of his gang, "get up to that shuttle and get the hardware."

I held my breath as he approached the lock doors, but they didn't open. He had to open and close them manually. So far, so good.

"Old man," The Hand spoke softly to Al. "We can't change your heart. That's between you and God. But we can, and *will,* keep you from damaging the faith of others. You will have one more chance to conform, after which we will refer the matter to the hereafter. Do you understand?"

Al groaned.

"Do you understand?"

"You bastard!" Al croaked. "Someday you're going to run into an IPA cutter that isn't helpless."

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The Hand laughed. "There are two within half an A.U. Both are commanded by men who know better than to see us when we don't want to be seen." He continued to brag about the power of the Hand of Mars in the asteroid belt, and several versions of what might happen to Al and Alice Two if Al continued to resist.

Just keep talking, I thought.

"Now, *do you understand?*" The Hand finished.

"Yes," Al groaned, more quietly. "I understand."

"And you know better than to complain about our visit in public?"

That was meant for me as well, I realized.

Before Al could answer, the cab lock doors hissed open. Shan with a gun.

I'd been right—the dip in the lights had meant just what I thought it had; Shan and Alice had restored power and Alexander was back on line, quietly listening to everything.

"Freeze!" Shan told them.

But The Hand and his cell mate turned and drew their weapons as if synchronized and fired at her.

And I thought something had gone terribly wrong: Shan wasn't carrying my gun; it was Alice Two's target pistol. Shan didn't stand a chance; she got off one round and it missed, going plop not a meter from my head. A rock skeet round, a lump of sticky silicone that couldn't have hurt anyone. Then she was falling to the cab floor with four trank darts in her.

But she'd done what she had to do.

While The Hand and his friends were making a pincushion out of Shan, the ceiling panel above me exploded down and Alice Two hurtled toward the floor, head down. She shot my Pearydome special four times before she slammed the floor with her arm and shot sideways in a maneuver every low gee kid knows to get out of the way of the return fire in a game of laser tag.

That's how she broke the arm; they never laid a finger on her. The Hands got off only one more round apiece before their bodies went numb.

We'll have to put the next down to genetics, because I don't believe in possession, or ghosts. But, when Alice Two rolled off the deck and picked out the targets, her cold, adult eyes were not hers, as I knew them; her face was not her child's face, but her mother's.

"Alexander!" I shouted when my wits returned. "Shan needs the standard antidote, now. She took four rounds." She, I realized, had taken the decoy role because her larger body stood a somewhat better chance of absorbing the chemical attack of The Hand's dart guns. Wishful thinking.

"They broke my motiles," the computer answered, "Alice will have to get it. Third compartment down, on the left of the supply bank."

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Alice was standing wide eyed, as if she couldn't believe what she'd just done. She wasn't tracking.

"Alice Two Montoya!" Al barked, fully conscious. "Get going!"

Alice ran. Al and I lay there, helpless, as the drug shut down Shan's body.

Alice was back in two minutes, ran right to Shan and pressed the hypo to the unconscious woman's arm. But, by all rights, Alice was too late, and we knew it. She hugged Shan and cried, then she came over to Al and me and gave us each a shot.

The only thing worse than lying there with your muscle nerves out is how you feel when they come back on again. My back arched involuntarily for a moment in a sickening spasm, then things subsided to mere pain. I raise an arm experimentally. It worked.

I stumbled over to Shan. She was still warm. I opened her mouth, found her tongue and got it out of her throat, then sealed my mouth over hers and blew. Her chest went up.

I pressed down on the breastbone, hard, three times, then repeated the process.

"There's a heart-starter kit in the med supply bank, Alice," Al said as he groaned and stumbled over to me and Shan. "Go get it. I'll do the heart, Zeke, you keep breathing. I assume you've called for help, Alexander?"

"Shan told me there is no reliable source of help within three days, best trajectory."

Reliable? I remembered those cutters with cooperative commanders.

"She was probably right. Call Vesta medical anyway. Don't mention the—garbage."

Al told the cyberservant who to ask for and who to get to come along.

Alice, wide-eyed and crying, came lugging the heart-starter with her left arm. Then we saw the broken piece of bone sticking out of her right. Al moved toward her, instinctively, but Alice shook her head and pointed to Shan.

We gave Shan a maximum dose of antidote and tried to get her heart started again with no luck. Desperate, we gave her more antidote, and within minutes she was delirious and very sick. Then she passed out again, but seemed to be sleeping and breathing on her own. When she seemed over the worst, we got to work on Alice.

Alice tried to stay conscious while we set her broken bone, saying she was curious about how to do it, in case she ever had to do it alone. Al plugged her with a hypo when she wasn't looking. We exposed the break, glued it, set it, and filled the exposed flesh with regen binder and taped the wound shut. We'd never done anything like that before, but Alexander walked us through, step by step, and it seemed to come out all right.

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Then we went back to the corridor and pulled off the hoods, and realized we would have to cover everything up tight, somehow.

The Hand, the head of his cell, was our supposedly neutral Vesta Council Chairman Dolen.

We stared at him. He had voted against the New Reformation as much as for it, but often, I reflected, on issues where his vote didn't matter. Five to two votes. If it got back that we'd hurt them so badly, so high, we'd have a dozen of these stealth raiders on top of Alice's Asteroid. Or worse, that "impossible" interplanetary war might just start. It seems silly now, but we were really worried about that possibility.

Dolen was conscious and immobile; he groaned, then started when he realized that his hood was gone, and his eyes went momentarily wide with fear, then sharp with cunning. "Look, Montoya, in politics, and I've been in Belt politics long enough for Ceres to go around three times, you have to catch the trend to stay on top. And you can't shrink from doing the dirty work yourself—trust someone else and they don't have as much at stake, and they screw it up.

"The Face of Mars smiles on those on top, Montoya. I don't want your soul; I just want you to stay out of my lunch pail. We can make a deal. I don't stay where I am without keeping my deals—you'll be just fine, everything you want, if you just shut up."

"Go on," Al growled.

"But if I don't come back, other people will come looking. You'll have a hard time proving anything your way, and a harder time protecting yourself and your daughter."

"Al?"

We turned to see Shan conscious, propped up on her elbow, bloodshot eyes staring at us, and not sounding at all well. Two strong chemicals were fighting a life-or-death war for control of her body, and the bystanding cells were getting hurt. "Al, don't give in. Look, give me the gun."

Al's eyes went wide.

"I'm an underground officer, and they can't do anything to me where I'm going anyway. Give it to me, quickly."

We couldn't find my gun, but we found The Hand's.

"You can't . . . " The Hand gasped when he saw. "We must be able to negotiate something!"

"Go off line, Alex," Al told Alexander. "Thank God Alice doesn't have to see this." Then he got a little predatory grin that I'd never seen on his face before. "And I thank God *I* do."

Shan didn't wait for any more argument, but shot three times into each of the immobilized Hands—a quick, merciful overdose. An atrocity? A necessary act of war? History will have to judge.

Shan's group, though the predecessor of our current libertarian belt government, had no legal status then. Did it really make any difference

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that Shan did the shooting rather than me, or Al, who stood by and watched? One of them managed to whimper as he faded away; the others just looked terrified. Shan dropped the gun, exhausted.

"Al, Zeke . . . " She took a long ragged breath. "As far as anyone is concerned, we were attacked by those pirates, and fought them off. Hand cells don't tell anyone what they're up to. Deniability. Their friends won't come looking if they don't know they were here. Get rid of the evidence. Look, about Alice," she gasped, then caught her breath again, struggling. "Al, you have to marry me, now. Then she'll have two parents and can stay here, right Zeke?"

I was by her side in a moment, and took her hand. It was cold, clammy. She could hardly squeeze back. *No,* I wanted to say. *Marry me.* I could divorce Kerri—she'd hardly notice. Shan and I could adopt Alice, then board her with Al. There was a thousand ways to work it out. All sorts of loopholes in the law. . . .

"Yes," I choked out, fighting back tears, trying to delay, "she could, as long as you live. But I think we better do something about that first. You need rest, your body needs help. . . ."

She shook her head. "It's too late. Al needs to marry me, *now,* then freeze me while I'm still technically alive. And we don't have long; I can feel myself going. My legs are cold. Damn, it's scary. Please do it while there's still time. For Alice."

"Shan," I said. "I love you. I have to say that, I . . . "

"Thanks, Zeke," her hand tightened slightly. "But you need to give Kerri another try, now that you're with us. Those parties of hers—they aren't all for fun—it's her cover. She couldn't tell you. Now let's get me married to Al; you know how to handle the records people, Zeke, please."

I nodded and told Alexander what to do. We woke Alice Two up and she had ten minutes alone with her new mother. Alice told me they talked of boys, weddings, school, and having a purpose, and then just hugged for the last minute or so.

Al hugged Shan as she fell asleep. With the right chemicals, volunteers on the interstellar project have been frozen for three months without harm. But we didn't have the right chemicals, only anti-frost bite crystal antagonists intended for temporary protection of parts of the body. Shan knew that; we all knew that, but it was either freeze her with what we had or let her die. So we put her to sleep and lowered her body temperature slowly with her shipsuit cooler. Then we moved her to Al's diamond lab, where he made the cryostat.

Al and I made up the cover story with the pirates trying to rape Alice Two, Shan shooting some of them, getting wounded, and them escaping. Then we sent their ship off with a timed dump on its computer core. There have to be a million things that size floating around in the belt.

When the medics came, they told us that freezing Shan was a very

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long shot anyway, and that even if we had the right stuff, the competing poisons inside her would have thrown everything off. She'd never regain consciousness if they tried to revive her.

But officially, her freezing was temporary, and the stealth majority on the human services board of education couldn't order me to break up the family. Shan was legally alive unless and until the medical people decided there was nothing they could do, and the medics were on our side. Someday, they said, officially, Shan might be revived.

So any further efforts to take Alice Two were postponed.

The cover story kept us, and especially Alice Two, free of retaliation, just in case some other Hand cells suspected who the pirates were. The press embellished it, and Shan became a martyr, though not for the real reasons. I became a hero, celebrated by the unknowing Reffies as much as anyone else.

Then, with the help of Kerri's social contacts, I became a politician and we elected a new council. With me replacing the missing Jim Dolen, and Adam Solacus exposed and defeated, things changed.

We won't give up. Shan's still there, in a sculpted diamond tube filled with liquid helium, on Alice's Asteroid, in a cave in the very heart of it, safe from high velocity rocks and most cosmic rays. Al visits her every day. Kerri and I come by when we can. There have been some very interesting experiments with rats in connection with the Interstellar Institute's cold sleep program on Ceres—vectors that diffuse slowly through frozen tissue and fix things. So there *is* hope.

I'd come to steal Alice Two's childhood, and so had the Hand of The Face of Mars. In a sense, we succeeded—overnight, the cheerful exuberant nymph had been replaced by a driven young woman, as serious and chaste as The Face of Mars could possibly have wanted. I'd give anything to hear her laugh again.

She's majoring in cryogenic sleep biology, Belt Medical Institute. Home study for now, but she'll have to leave her Asteroid for a year's residency. That shouldn't be a problem now; she's grown, the Vesta Belt Confederation has been recognized by the IPA, and, with all the strangeness of political evolution, libertarians are firmly in charge. We voted the underground members, including Shan, a blanket pardon; otherwise I wouldn't be writing this account of our "battle."

Finally, somewhere in the asteroid belt, in a chaotic orbit that might still cross that of Vesta, there is a drifting spacecraft of the stealthy kind once used by the Hand of The Face of Mars. It should look to the casual observer as if its computer had an unfortunate encounter with a drifting rock, and its crew decided to sacrifice themselves like good fanatics rather than call for help and expose their mission.

I'd rather history not treat them so kindly. ●

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Ghosts in a Temblor

Only when the walls are heaving
will the cursing spirits leave.
As they exit, disbelieving,
tremblers in the attic grieve

with wooden-throated banshee sounds.
Dowels from the roofbeams pop
like champagne corks, and all around
the poltergeists, disgruntled, stop

to watch the building sag and sway.
Chandeliers, downrooted, fall
to squash the rats that chose to stay.
Rooms accordion to halls

and halls to rooms. Lath and plaster
falling faster fill the air
with dervishes of ectoplasm.
Three at once they take the stairs.

The fleeing spirits mourn the end
of centuries of durance
vile, cursing what they didn't spend:
No insurance! No insurance!

—Keith Allen Daniels

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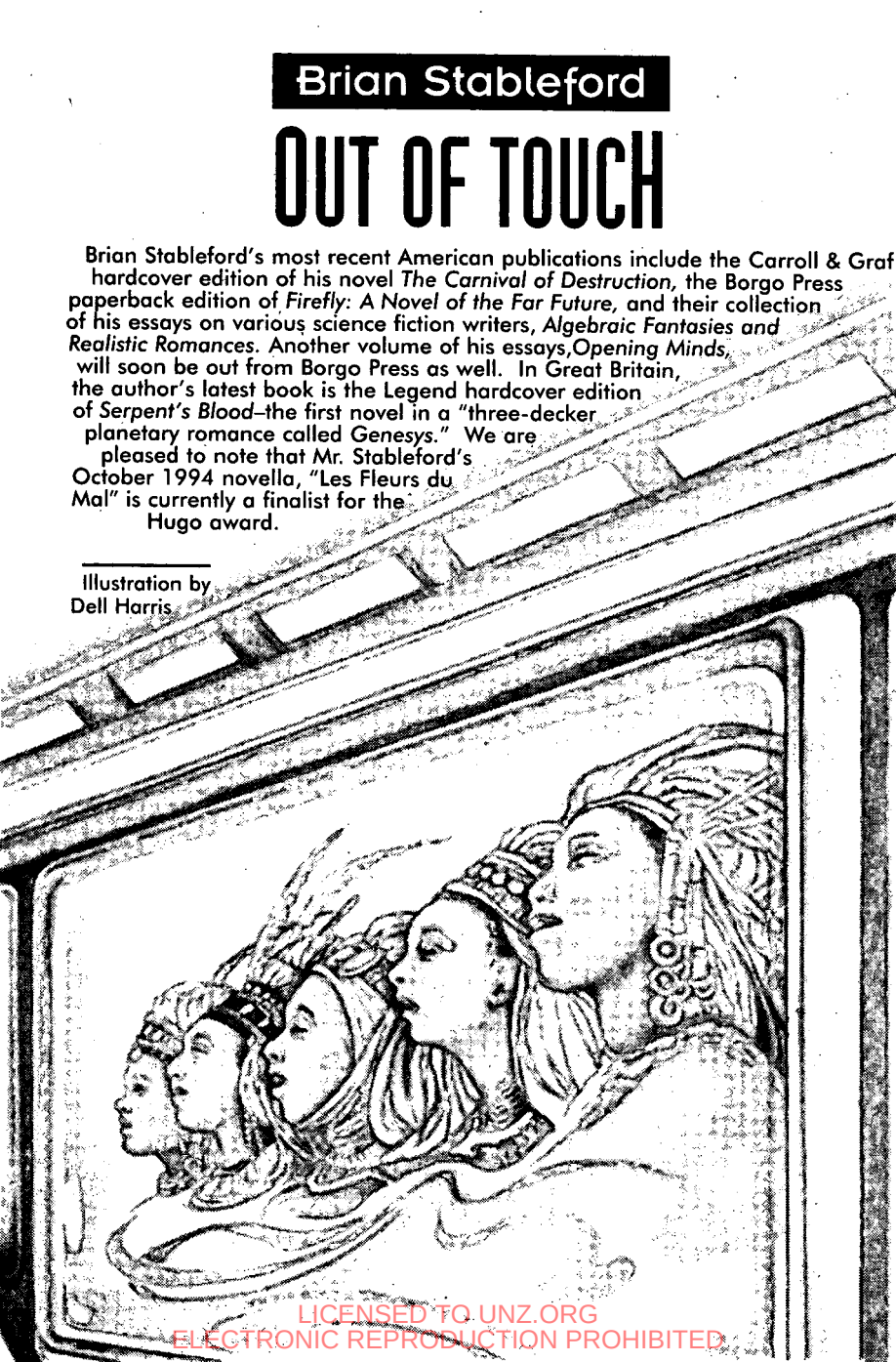
Brian Stableford

OUT OF TOUCH

Brian Stableford's most recent American publications include the Carroll & Graf hardcover edition of his novel *The Carnival of Destruction*, the Borgo Press paperback edition of *Firefly: A Novel of the Far Future*, and their collection of his essays on various science fiction writers, *Algebraic Fantasies and Realistic Romances*. Another volume of his essays, *Opening Minds*, will soon be out from Borgo Press as well. In Great Britain, the author's latest book is the Legend hardcover edition of *Serpent's Blood*–the first novel in a "three-decker planetary romance called *Genesys*." We are pleased to note that Mr. Stableford's October 1994 novella, "Les Fleurs du Mal" is currently a finalist for the Hugo award.

Illustration by Dell Harris



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When he'd moved the cases out on to the roadway and locked the door behind him, Jake went around to the back—or, as he'd always thought of it, the front—of the house, so that he could watch the breakers rolling up the deserted beach. The sea was on the retreat, having delivered the usual cargo of rubbish to the ragged tideline. When he and Martha had first moved into the village, there had been bits of kelp and dead crabs mixed in with the beached flotsam, but nowadays the waste was all man-made. Red plastic bottle-tops stood out like warning lights.

While he stood there watching the dull grey waves, Peterson, the caretaker, came to say goodbye. "Your kids comin' to pick you up?" he asked, although he knew perfectly well that they were.

"Sam and Doreen," Jake said, although Peterson could hardly be interested in knowing their names. "Sam's my son. They've been married twenty years, but there are no grandchildren. Kids don't seem to have kids of their own any more."

"Comes of expectin' to live forever," Peterson said, laconically. "Guess you won't be seein' no old people any more. Quite a change. Never figured on endin' up as one of an endangered species!"

"There are old people in the cities," Jake told him. "Lots of them."

"I warn't includin' the Third Worlders."

"Neither was I."

"Well, there won't be lots of 'em for *long,*" Peterson said, with a sigh. "What'd you give to have been born twenty years later, hey?"

"I'd give a lot not to have been born thirty years sooner," Jake countered, trying his damnedest to look on the bright side. "We missed the worst of the wars, you and I. We missed the worst of a lot of things."

"An' the best of everythin'," Peterson added, sourly. The closing of the Village had only cost the residents their so-called retirement homes, but it had cost the caretaker a living. Peterson had managed to avoid accumulating enough social credits to qualify for the full welfare handout—which presumably meant that he'd spent time in jail, although Jake had never asked and Martha's gossip grapevine had never picked up a reliable rumor—and he didn't seem to have any kids to help him out. Who could blame the old misery for being bitter, when he had cause to be envious not merely of the younger generations, who had been granted permission to drink at the fountain of youth, but also of his own peers?

"I'm going to miss this place," Jake said, softly, as he heard the sound of a car drawing up out front—or out back, the way he preferred to figure it.

"It was allus just a waiting-room for the graveyard," Peterson assured him, his voice grating like an old hinge. "Have everything you need and more where you're goin', includin' ocean views."

I won't have Martha, Jake thought, suffering the now-familiar pang

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whenever that particular thought resounded in his head. All he said out loud was: "It's not the same when you can only see, and not touch."

"It's not the same," Jake said, while Sam's nimble fingers ran through twenty or thirty of the most popular outlooks to which the window had access.

"Yes, it *is,* Dad," Sam said, patiently. "The image is optically perfect—parallax-shifts and everything. It's *exactly* like looking through a real window, except that you have the choice of a million *different* windows to look through. Sure, some of them are taped and edited and some are digitally synthesized, but there are more than two hundred that are relayed live. You see exactly what you'd see if the house were really *there:* South Sea atolls, Alaska, the Himalayas . . . even fifteen fathoms deep off the Great Barrier Reef! With the remote control in your hand, you can surf the whole world. This is *everywhere."*

By way of illustration, Sam summoned the Great Barrier Reef—which, by virtue of being entirely artificial, was abundantly stocked with pretty fish and virtually litter-free. Apparently, there really *were* dwellings on the ocean floor, which could be picked up relatively cheaply now that the wave of fashion had passed them by.

"It's downtown Brownsville," Jake insisted, stubbornly. "There's nothing the other side of that wall but *another* wall. If there really were a window cut there, there'd be nothing to see but bricks."

"We don't have bricks any more, Dad," Sam reminded him. "The outer tegument of the house is overlaid with plates of reinforced dextrochitin."

"I'll try to forget that," Jake replied. "It makes it sound like we're living inside a giant cockroach. The point is, Sam, that it's not a *real* window. It's a fake. You can look through, but you can't open it to breathe the air. There's nothing to *touch."*

"You can touch if you use the VR set," Doreen put in, helpfully. "It's only a headset and a pair of gloves, I know, but you really do get the sensation of moving through the environments, and the tactile simulators in the gloves are really very good. You don't have the same range as the window, of course, but they're developing so *fast* . . . every week there's a dozen new scenarios available."

"And you don't have to worry about the cable bill," Sam added. "You can call up what you want when you want—no limit. Honestly, Dad, we want you to be happy here. We want you to be *free."*

"That's the modern way of looking at things, is it?" Jake said, awkwardly conscious of the depth of his ingratitude. "With a window and a fancy flying-helmet, you can be free, even in a prison. Anyplace is everyplace, just as long as you have the right gadgets."

"Hell, Dad, you had a VR set in the Village, and a cable hook-up for space-sharing. It's not like you were living in some mud hut compared

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to which this is Disneyland. You're only twenty-seven years older than I am, and you worked all your life with robots and spy-eyes. Okay, you were a hardware man, a *real* engineer, but you're no dirt-farmer sucked into the twenty-first century wilderness through some time-warp. You understand all this stuff just fine. We're trying to make a home for you here and we're doing the best we can, okay?"

"Sure it's okay," Jake said, sitting down on the bed and tiredly laying out his trump card—the one they'd never be able to beat or face down. "After all, I'm not going to be here for long, am I?"

Sam switched the window to a starry night, so dark and so very starry that it had to be on the moon. Doreen picked an invisible speck of dirt off one of the roses that were growing out of the wall around the bathroom-unit. They didn't bother with the customary reassurances; they thought he was behaving too badly to deserve even that. Maybe he *was,* but the fact remained that although Sam was only twenty-seven years younger than his father, *Sam* didn't look a day over twenty-five, and would *never* look any older—whereas every one of Jake's sixty-seven years was indelibly marked on his face and his hands and his irredeemably spoiled heart.

If he were lucky, Jake thought, he might get to occupy this plush cell for twenty or thirty years. Nobody could tell how long Sam might outlive him; perhaps a hundred years, perhaps a thousand. There was insufficient data, as yet, on which to base an estimate of the life-expectancy of the eternally young, and the data was likely to remain insufficient for a very long time.

"We'll leave you to unpack and get settled in," Sam said, probably as gently as he could. "You have your own dispenser, of course, but if you'd like to join us for dinner, you'd be more than welcome. We generally eat at seven-thirty. If there's anything you need that you don't have, you only have to ask."

"Thanks," Jake said, as sincerely as he could. "Thanks for everything. You too, Doreen."

"It's okay," Doreen said, as she followed Sam out of the door. "We do understand."

They thought that they did understand. They understood that he'd been set in his ways long before he went to the Village, but was set no longer now that he'd lost both Martha and the Village. They understood that he was an *old man,* who didn't have their adaptability, their patience, their confidence. They understood that he was a member of a species that was soon to be extinct, who had to be treated with the utmost care and consideration and kindness. Unfortunately, that still left an awful lot to be understood.

"I should be in a zoo," Jake whispered, so softly that no one could have heard him even if the room had been crowded. "People with windows

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should be tuning in to watch *me*. Maybe I should call Peterson and suggest that he should hire himself out as a specimen for twenty-four-hour-a-day surveillance. Maybe they'd pay him enough to get a window of his own, so that people all over the world could watch him peering myopically out into infinity."

He picked up the remote control and switched off the staring stars. He tried, unsuccessfully, to get a blank screen, or a brick wall, but he had to settle for a beach scene. He could tell that it wasn't an American beach because the dark wrack marking the tideline was all seaweed and driftwood, without a red bottle-top in sight, but he figured that it would have to do—for now.

There wasn't much to unpack—which was perhaps as well, given that there wasn't a vast amount of space in which to put it. Every square meter of wall that wasn't host to biomachinery of some kind was fitted out with cupboards and drawers, but they filled up in no time at all with clothes and antique junk. There were books and tapes and photographs and other similarly useless things: things that had been Martha's and that she wouldn't have wanted him to throw away; things that had been his and that Martha would have kept if she'd been here instead of him; things that were his own personal museum of the life he'd led, and that—given that he was fated to be one of the last of his kind—he felt he ought to keep.

In the end, after some sifting and rearranging, he managed to find a place for everything. He wasn't entirely sure whether that was a good sign or not.

"It's really very easy to make friends," Doreen assured him.

"It's very easy to make *virtual* friends," Jake corrected her.

"The people you meet in virtual space are just as real as *you* are," she said, allowing a hint of exasperation to creep into her voice, "and they can be *real* friends, too. Yes, you only see their simulacra, not *them,* but when you think about it, what do you *ever* see of people you meet in the flesh except the masks they put on for the sake of politeness? Really, you know, *all* social space is virtual space. There's no real difference between putting your headset on and logging on to a network and putting your coat on to go walking in the neighborhood, except that the scenery's nicer and nobody ever got mugged in virtual space."

Doreen and Sam both worked in virtual space. Doreen was some kind of trader dealing in futures; she made more money than Sam, who reprogrammed neurotic AIs, although his seemed more like real work to Jake. Because they both worked in virtual space, Sam and Doreen thought it entirely natural to socialize there. If they could have moved there lock, stock, and barrel, they probably would have. Jake, by contrast, always

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felt like a stranger in a strange land, like some Third World migrant in the Jersey Sprawl.

"The only people who never get mugged in virtual space are the ones who never tune in the shopping channels," Jake told his daughter-in-law, tartly. It seemed a more pertinent comment than pointing out that hardly anyone ever got mugged in the neighborhood either because the surveillance bugs were far too good at seeing in the dark. The Third World might have come to camp on the doorstep of the First, as the newstapes were forever assuring the nervous citizens of America, but the migrants tended to steer clear of streets where they were under constant observation by thousand of electronic eyes. In any case, Brownsville had far less than its fair share of migrants. It was only just over the border, much too close to home.

Doreen flopped down on the bed, lay supine, and threw her arms back in an exaggerated gesture of defeat.

"Okay," she said. "You win. If you're *that* determined to be miserable, there's absolutely nothing Sam or I can do about it. If you're absolutely dead set on not having a moment's pleasure between now and the moment you finally kick the bucket, nobody in the world can prevent you. But *why,* Jake? Why are you doing it? Is it yourself you're intent on hurting, or are you trying to make Sam and I feel *guilty* about something? About *what?* About giving you a room in our house? About not getting older? Tell me, Jake—what would *you* have done if you'd been in Sam's shoes? Would you have said 'No! I won't take the treatment unless my dear old Dad can benefit from it too'? Would you have said 'No! I can't insult the wrinkly old curmudgeon by inviting him to come live in *my* house'? Just tell me what you *want,* will you?"

Jake stood over her, extending a helping hand. When she finally condescended to take it, he hauled her back to her feet—or tried to. He no longer had the strength he had once been able to take for granted.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm really not criticizing. I'm grateful to Sam and to you. I ought to be more cheerful, if only for your sakes, because I certainly don't want to make *you* miserable. I wish I *could* be cheerful, but . . ."

There was a long pause before she said: "But *what,* Jake?" She honestly didn't know. How could she?

"I really miss Martha," he said, simply, knowing that it would go down better than the truth. Not that it *wasn't* true, of course. He *did* miss Martha. It just wasn't the *whole* truth, or anything like.

Doreen's face softened, as he'd known it would. "I know," she said, reaching out to hug him. He let her, because he knew how much better it would make her feel. At least she didn't launch into a speech about life having to go on, and what Martha would have wanted.

What Martha would have wanted, if she'd had a choice, was still to be

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alive. Maybe she'd have settled for a window in her grave, but only as second best. She was always ready to compromise, always ready to split the difference. She'd have had an easier life if she'd married a more generous haggler than Jake had ever been.

"I miss lots of things," Jake added, as Doreen released him.

"Of course you do," she said. She could probably have made a list. He missed his youth, and his health, and the world in which he'd been a force to be reckoned with—inasmuch as any fairly mediocre human being could be a force to be reckoned with, in a world that had come storming back from the edge of the ecocatastrophic abyss, eventually to win the greatest prize imaginable.

"I honestly don't want to make friends," he told her, when the tension seemed to have unwound and they were no longer at odds. "People kept urging me to make friends in the Village, but I wouldn't. Martha always wanted me to be more sociable—I think she'd have been happier if her friends had been *ours*—but I never really saw the need, or the point. I don't want to spend my days jabbering away to other old men about the past we've all lost but never really shared, and I certainly don't want to while away my time playing *games.* I was never one for games, ever. I suppose I was never one for people, much. Martha used to say that I spent so much time with robots that I could only relate to disembodied arms and freaky hands, and then only if they weren't working properly."

"That's okay," Doreen said. "It's fine. Sam and I don't want you to do anything you don't want to do, or anything you're not comfortable with. But what *do* you want to do, Jake? What will it take to make the life you've got left worthwhile?"

A miracle, he thought. *Another breakthrough just like the one you got. A way not simply to put the brakes on the aging process but to throw the bastard into reverse gear, to undo the damage that's already been done, to turn back the clock. . . .*

"I don't know," he said, truthfully. "I'm trying. It may not look like it sometimes, but I *am* trying."

"If you want to join us for dinner," she said, "we'll be eating about seven-thirty."

She and Sam always ate at about seven-thirty. There was never any possibility of either of them being late home from work, and they never had anywhere to go except the further reaches of the virtual universe.

"It's okay," Jake said. "I'm not that hungry. I'll get something from my own unit a little later."

"That's fine," she said, stoutly refusing to be offended. "If you change your mind, you know where we are."

When Doreen closed the door behind her, Jake felt a perverse urge to lock it, but he wasn't even sure that the door had a locking function, and if it had, he didn't know how to operate it. There was so much to learn,

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and so little time to learn it. His room was no more than four meters square, and yet there was so much to be done within its boundaries and barriers that even an eternal youth like Sam couldn't be expected to exhaust its possibilities in the space of a single lifetime.

For a man like me, Jake thought, *it's just a cell on Death Row. No use making myself too much at home.* He opened a cupboard and took out one of his old paperback books—a book printed before he'd been born—and sat down on the bed to read. He gave up before he reached the third page, wondering what on earth he was trying to prove. *I'll be chipping flints next,* he thought.

Outside the window, a brontosaurus whose enormous body was half-submerged in swamp-water was patiently and methodically chewing its way through the lush foliage of a huge gymnosperm. Jake tried to catch its eye, but he couldn't. He could look out easily enough, but there was no way the brontosaurus could have looked in, even if it had been real.

Jake didn't warn Sam and Doreen that he'd bought the tamarin, so they were somewhat disconcerted when it arrived at the door. He hadn't consciously planned to lay down a challenge to their insistence that he could treat their home as his own, but he was interested to see their reactions nevertheless.

"It's okay," he assured them. "It's engineered for maximum tidiness and programmed for social responsibility. It won't make any dirty messes, and it won't press any buttons it isn't supposed to."

"I don't doubt that," Sam said, although he evidently did feel uneasy on both scores. "I'm just surprised, that's all. Why do you think you need it? I wouldn't have thought cute and fluffy was quite your *style.*"

"It's just a sophisticated biochip that does the talking," Doreen chimed in. "It's exactly like talking to a conversational program on the net. It's not really an animal—just an organic robot."

"It won't give you any trouble," Jake insisted, doggedly. "It'll live in my room. It won't bother you at all."

This turned out not to be entirely true. The pet's programming had to be open-ended to allow it to adapt to its owner's conversational habits, and it did tend to wander if Jake wasn't paying attention. If it wasn't authentically curious, it gave a very good impression, and its restless fingers did occasionally push buttons that would have been better unpushed. It caused no disasters, but it did produce a measure of exasperating inconvenience. Perhaps it was all Sam's fault for making too much of an effort in the first couple of weeks; he only had to speak to the creature a few times to be included in its rapidly evolving response-system as an honorary co-owner, and thus to be pestered whenever he was available for pestering and Jake was otherwise occupied. Even though Doreen never said much more to the creature than "Go away!"

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she too was awarded a special place in its scheme of things, and its constant craven apologies to her quickly became as much of an annoyance as jeers and insults would have been.

Jake could not have liked the creature half as much had it not been so subtly and insistently wayward.

In the early days of their relationship, the tamarin's conversation left much to be desired. It had a memory-chip which carried a potential vocabulary far larger than Jake's, but it was programmed to limit its competence to match *his,* so he had to spend time telling it elaborate stories using as many words as he could squeeze in. For a time, this educative process was enjoyable. It injected new purpose into such activities as looking out of the window and watching the TV news, because Jake was able—indeed, *required*—to deliver a running commentary on everything that could be seen, so that the tamarin could be familiarized with his descriptive powers and his attitudes. After a while, however, the whole thing began to seem like a chore, and the increasingly prolific contributions made by the pet came to seem like mockingly convoluted echoes of his own thought-processes.

"The trouble with you, little monkey," Jake said to the tamarin, as they looked out of the window on to a busy street in the market quarter of some tropical city, watching the crowds go by, "is that you're too good to be true. You're the whole goddam world in a nutshell: bland, obliging, and fundamentally mechanical."

"The trouble with *you,* Jake," the tamarin replied, airily, "is that you don't know what you want from me. You change your mind from one day to the next, or one minute to the next! I could have had a nice kid for an owner, you know—a lovely little girl, full of hope and excitement and curiosity. You think this is an easy ride for me? Believe me, it isn't."

"There you go again," Jake said. "I call you bland, you immediately start compensating. Too goddam obliging."

On the other side of the window, a young street-arab made an obscene gesture. He was looking straight at Jake and the monkey, but Jake knew that it was just a performance—something he probably did in front of every spy-eye he passed, on the off chance that someone might be watching. Jake wished that there was some way that the kid could have known for *sure* that he was there, so that the gesture could have been *personal* instead of merely ritual.

"Why did he do that?" the tamarin asked, almost as if it had read Jake's secret wish. "It's not as if he can see us."

"That program of yours is too clever by half," Jake complained. "It's better at reading people than *people* are. Heaven help us if your kind ever get the all clear to run for office! On the other hand, you'll probably run the world a lot better than *we* do, at least until you master the Machiavellian arts of greed and corruption. He did that because he's

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saying *up yours!* to the entire First World—because he knows that the things we have today, he'll have tomorrow. He knows that his time is coming, and that he'll have all the time he needs to get what he wants. The treatment's too easy and too cheap, you see. It can't be hoarded or controlled. It's spreading like an epidemic, and the only people who *can't* benefit from it are the people who are *already* old, already damaged. He knows that he won't always be on the outside being looked at from within, no matter how many rich folks hereabouts are screaming blue murder about population problems and social utility."

"There are a lot of old people out there," the tamarin observed, scanning the street scene with his little dark eyes. "A *lot* of old people. And a lot of people so very nearly old that they can't wait long."

"That's right," Jake said. "But they're going about their business in a quiet and orderly way, because they don't dare to do otherwise. All their fear and resentment is held in check, because this is one cause it wouldn't make sense to risk death for. They all believe that their time is coming, if only they'll be patient, and they're *right.* All except the ones who've already missed out."

"*I'll* die too," the tamarin said. "Artificial flesh is designed to be mortal."

"I know," Jake said. "I read the specs."

"Is that why you bought me? Because I'm in the same boat as you, and Sam and Doreen aren't? Is that why you needed me?"

"I wish I knew," Jake said, tiredly. "I wish I knew."

The tamarin was designed for indoor life; it didn't need space or exercise. Even so, Jake began to take it out for "walks." It clung to his shoulder, ducking low to get under the wide brim of his hat; when he talked to it out of the corner of his mouth, its replies were discreetly murmurous. He took it to places where there were trees, so that he could watch it playing in the branches. It was quite an athlete. Sometimes, he wished it would take the opportunity to make a dash for freedom, but it never did. It had its inbuilt limitations.

On occasion, when the sun was at full blast in a cloudless sky and the temperature was over a hundred in the shade, the tamarin complained that it would rather stay home, but Jake was never quite sure whether it was protesting on its own behalf or being protective of him.

"The species on which you're modeled used to live way down south," he told it, on one occasion. "I never could understand why natural selection handed out fur coats to tropical monkeys, but it can't have been an accident. By rights, you ought to like the hot weather."

"The species on which *you're* modeled evolved on the plains of equatorial Africa," the tamarin pointed out, "but that didn't stop you from inventing air conditioning."

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"The monkey's right," Sam told him, as he stepped out the door. "Neither of you is fitted by nature for wandering around under the noonday sun. It's not as if you were mad dogs or Englishmen!"

"I wear a hat," Jake retorted, pausing in order to make an argument of it. "Anyway, I'm not primed for skin cancer. *My* weak spot is the heart. You know that. Congenital weakness emphasized by wear and tear. That's the way *I'll* be going."

"I wish *you'd* talk some sense into him," Sam said to the tamarin. "He never listens to me."

"He always listens," the tamarin riposted, loyally. "He just doesn't take any notice. He's old enough to make up his own mind."

"He sounds more like you than you do," Sam said, wearily—to Jake, not the monkey.

"Better buy one for Doreen," Jake suggested. "Pretty soon it'd have everything she's got and good looks too." But that was uncalled-for, and they both knew it. He cleared out without further delay.

He didn't enjoy the outing. Sam and the monkey were right, as usual; it was far too hot outdoors for anything that moved. Even the trees seemed to be wilting under the sun's relentless assault. The tamarin put on its usual acrobatic display, with all possible zest, but it wasn't really having fun. It was only pretending. Everything it did—everything it was or might become—was mere pretense.

On the way back to the house, they passed thirty-three beggars—four more than the previous record count—but they weren't menaced in any way whatsoever. There was nothing in the dark and silent eyes that watched them go by but reproach . . . and perhaps, in the younger ones, a little pity.

"So much for trying to make the migrants stay home by promising to give full-aid priority to long-established populations," Jake said. "They don't believe us any more. Time was when the word of our politicians was our bond."

"Would that be Lincoln you're thinking of, or George Washington?" the tamarin inquired.

"Saint Thomas More," Jake answered.

"He wasn't an American."

"In spirit he was."

"In spirit," the tamarin told him, "so are *they*. For that matter, so am I."

"I was myself, once," Jake was quick to add, always desirous of claiming the last word. "But that was a long time ago."

The tamarin politely conceded the game. It always did, but Jake never felt that he'd won. Time after time after time, come blazing heat or pouring rain, he claimed the last line—but he never felt that he'd *proved* anything.

* * *

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They'd been walking for a long time, but it wasn't until they got to the head of the sliproad leading up to the highway that the tamarin finally asked him, wearily, where they were going *this time?*

"I don't know," Jake replied, truthfully. "I thought we might hitch a ride someplace. Anyplace would do."

"Do you think that's wise?" the tamarin asked.

"No," Jake said. "If it was wise, I wouldn't want to do it."

"I can understand that," the tamarin assured him, "but isn't it just a little *too* haphazard? You might count it a bonus that Sam won't like it, but he really *will* be worried if you go missing and turn up three days later in New York or Vancouver."

"Nobody drives from Brownsville to Vancouver," was all Jake said in reply. "We'll be lucky to get as far as Corpus Christi." He had already noted that at least nine out of every ten vehicles that passed them were on automatic, and that the few manual drivers tended to stare at his outstretched thumb as if he were out of his mind.

"There's nothing *out* there, Jake," the monkey said, very softly, as it plucked at the lobe of his ear with its tiny hand. "You know that. We've looked at the whole goddam world through your window, and a thousand places more. We know there's no rainbow's end, don't we?"

"That kind of window is just a wall with delusions of grandeur," Jake said, knowing that he was repeating himself. "You can look, but you can't *touch*. The road is *real*. It goes to someplace *real*."

"What is it you want to touch, Jake?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'll know when I see it, maybe I won't. Either way, I don't want to sit around the rest of my life just *watching*. Just for once, I want to *go* somewhere. Just for once, I want to *be* somewhere. Anywhere. Nowhere. You can go home if you want to. You can spill the beans to Sam if you want to."

That was unfair, not least because it was untrue. The tamarin *couldn't* go home, unless he gave it a definite order properly confirmed—but Jake wasn't about to compromise the perversity of his mood by being *fair*.

The car that finally skidded to a halt thirty meters beyond them was just about the oldest model Jake had seen all day. So was the driver, who must have been seventy-five if he were a day. The driver didn't ask Jake where he was headed; as soon as the door was closed, he put his foot right down and roared off.

The car's dashboard was an absolute mess, with circuit-boards exposed here, there, and everywhere. The top of the windshield, where all the virtual displays should have been, was quite blank.

"I guess you like tinkering," Jake said. "My name's Jake, by the way."

"Never ride in a car that can be hijacked by remote control," the other advised him. "I'm Conor O'Callaghan. That's Irish. Family goes right

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back to the great potato famine. Much better class of immigrant in those days. Not like now. Country's going to hell."

The vehicle jagged from lane to lane in the same staccato style as his speech, out to the fastest track and then half-way in again. Most of the traffic on the highway consisted of disciplined convoys of robotrucks, which Conor seemed to take a profound delight in disrupting. A forlorn red light was blinking in the center of the steering-column like a stranded bottle-top.

"I believe that's a police warning, Mr. O'Callaghan," the tamarin remarked. It was the first time the creature had ever displayed knowledge that Jake didn't have, and it was that rather than the red light itself that belatedly alerted Jake to the fact that all was not well.

"That monkey of yours a fink?" the driver asked. "If it is, I'd be obliged if it'd get the hell out before the sirens start screeching."

"This is a *stolen car!*" Jake said, wonderingly.

"Well hell, a man wouldn't want to do all *that* to his *own* car, would he?" the driver said, presumably meaning the exposed circuit-boards and the various kinds of sabotage that had doubtless been worked upon them. "Don't worry—she might be old, but she's got all the safety features. I don't think I could kill us if I were to throw her off a bridge. Course, that thing on your shoulder ain't belted in, so it might bounce around a bit when we cut to the chase."

In the distance, Jake heard the wailing of sirens. They seemed to be getting closer with remarkable rapidity.

"They're fast," Conor conceded, as if he'd caught the thought crossing Jake's mind, "but they ain't allowed to be *reckless*. Gettin' on our tail is one thing—*catchin'* us is somethin' else!"

Again the car began to zigzag from lane to lane. Conor recklessly hurled the vehicle at the wheels of mammoth robotrucks, which dutifully swerved and altered pace with lumbering grace. The juggernauts always managed to avoid the car, if only by a seeming thumb's-width. Jake remembered, though, that nearly one in ten of the vehicles that had passed him on the sliproad had had human drivers. He wondered how many of those drivers had failed to switch to automatic after filtering into the highway traffic, and how many had been messing around with their own circuit-boards.

"Do you do this often?" he inquired, astonished by the mildness of his tone. He was afraid, but the fear didn't seem to *hurt*. Thus far, it was just a kind of excitement.

"Not as often as I'd like," Conor confessed.

"Do you always pick up hitchhikers when you do?"

"Don't usually *see* any. Wouldn't pick up a Third Worlder, of course, or anyone under the age of irresponsibility, but I figured you might be grateful. Am I wrong?"

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Jake wasn't sure what the answer to that question was, but he was saved from the necessity of offering one by the nervous tamarin, which leapt down on to the dashboard to stare through the windshield with evident alarm.

"Central Traffic Control is slowing the traffic down," the monkey said, in a decidedly officious tone. "It would be dangerous in the extreme to maintain our present speed."

"Naw," said the driver. "It gets even *more* exciting when they turn the road into an obstacle course!"

Jake saw that the rest of the traffic was indeed being brought to a gradual standstill. Soon theirs would be the only vehicle on the move, except for the pursuing police vehicles. The robotrucks were drawing inward by careful degrees, leaving the outermost lanes of the highway empty, but Conor didn't immediately move out there; he continued weaving in and out of the middle lanes, cutting across other vehicles with reckless abandon. They continued to avoid him with marvelous agility and patience.

Jake realized, somewhat to his disappointment, that the experience wasn't so very different from a VR "ride," and that his familiarity with such rides, although limited, was determining the oddly qualified and carefully muffled terror of his responses.

I'm so out of touch with reality that I can't even grasp it any more, he thought. *This is what it's come to. I'm going to die, and it's just another virtual experience.*

"Do you have any idea how many people you're inconveniencing, Mr. O'Callaghan?" the tamarin asked, in a censorious manner that was certainly no reflection of Jake's personality.

"Sure *do,*" Conor said, enthusiastically. "Putting a road-block across a twelve-lane superhighway is one *hell* of an operation. Snarls up twenty, maybe twenty-five thousand vehicles. Last lot of fines bankrupted me—from now on, I'm dying on credit!"

"They'll put you under house arrest," Jake said, wonderingly. "You'll never be able to go out again, ever."

"Depends how good their locks are," Conor replied. "I've been a cracker since I was so high. Takes solid walls and heavy bolts to keep *me* inside—software won't do it. Nice day trip, hey?"

Jake laughed, feeling a strange wave of relief pass through him as the car was forced back into the empty outer lanes. There was now a solid wall of robotrucks to their right, and nothing ahead of them for at least a kilometer. As the wave passed, though, Jake began to eye the barrier protecting the grassy median, wondering just how crazy the old man was.

He turned in his seat. The pursuing police cars were coming up fast. Conor began to jiggle the wheel from side to side so that the car veered from one empty lane to another. The pursuers' safety mechanisms held

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them back; they couldn't overtake unless he left them an adequate gap, and he was a very good judge of adequate gaps.

"I strongly advise you to slow down, sir," the tamarin said, leaping back on to Jake's shoulder and then slipping down behind the seats. It was taking protective action; it had seen the road-block that was looming up ahead of them.

Conor didn't slow down. He just drove full tilt at the road-block.

The distance separating the car from the block disappeared with terrifying fluidity, and Jake felt his heart—his weak, unstable heart—pounding in his chest like an earth-breaking drill of a type he hadn't seen in fifty years. The terror inside him back-flipped out of its virtual mode and became suddenly, overwhelmingly forceful. It was *mortal terror* now; he *knew* that they were going to crash, that the car and the whole damn world were going to be torn apart.

The only thing he didn't know was *why*.

In spite of his authentic terror, that was the thought that seized hold of him as they hurtled toward the barrier: *Why is the crazy man doing this? Because he knows that he won't die, or because he hopes that he might?*

Conor had obviously done this before. For him, it was just a joyride, just a day out—but it was Jake's first time, and he had never been in a crash of any kind. As the barrier hurtled toward them like the black horizon of death itself, Jake's poor heart leaped and lurched and tried with all its pathetic might to explode.

He never felt the impact. He saw it, but he never felt a thing.

Jake woke up in his own bed, feeling dreadful.

Sam was stationed to the right, Doreen to the left. Sam was pale, exhausted, and anxious; Doreen was flushed, agitated, and solicitous. It didn't take long for their tender inquiries to give way to harsh recriminations.

"You could have been killed," Sam said. "You very nearly *were*."

"The car had safety features," Jake muttered. "Crazy Conor by-passed all the software checks, but the hardware was still in place."

"That's not the point," Sam persisted. "You had a major heart attack, Dad. If there hadn't been an ambulance waiting behind the barrier, you'd be stone dead. As it is, you might have lost five or ten years. It wasn't trivial, Dad—nothing *is*, at your age."

No, Jake thought. *At my age, nothing is.*

"Where did you think you were *going*, Jake?" Doreen wanted to know. She was fussing over him, fluffing the pillows, checking the many wires and catheters which connected various parts of his prone body to the house physician, reading the various displays which were monitoring his

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all-too-frail flesh. Somehow, she gave the impression of being in her element—which was odd, given her actual vocation.

They've got me where they want me now, he thought, uncharitably. "Nowhere," he said out loud.

"Well," said Sam, "you nearly made it. You won't be going out again for quite some time. Fortunately, that lunatic you were with won't be going out for the rest of his life. Why on earth did you hitch a ride with a maniac like that?"

"He offered," Jake said. "Where's the tamarin?"

They had both been bending over him, but now they straightened up like twin pillars. He felt as if he were somehow suspended between them and drawn unnaturally taut.

"The monkey didn't have a belt or an airbag," Sam said, reluctantly. "It must have tried to use the back of your seat as a cushion. It would have been okay if only the back seat hadn't been sheared from its moorings. That's why your back hurts—you bruised several vertebrae. The monkey was caught and crushed. There was nothing the medical team could do."

"I'm sorry," Doreen was quick to say, as if someone might have suspected her of being glad if she hadn't said it.

"Oh shit," said Jake.

The silence was hard to bear, but not as hard to bear as the things they were too diplomatic to say out loud. Things like *it was only a kind of robot, not really alive at all;* or, *you can get another one if you want;* or, *it was your own stupid fault you stupid, senile old fool.* He noticed, for the first time, that his back really *was* in a bad way. He'd be walking stiffly for some time, if and when he was able to get up again.

He tried to twist himself around so that he could look at the monitors that were collating an objective record of his distress, but his spine wouldn't tolerate the torque and the displays were too high up on the wall.

"It's my data," he said, sourly. "I ought to be able to read it."

"You can," Doreen told him, in matronly fashion. "All you have to do is put the VR helmet on. It'll put a full display right before your eyes. You can watch your insides churning away through a fleet of internal cameras if you want to."

Suddenly, it didn't seem like such a good idea.

"No charges have been filed against you," Sam said, obviously thinking that there was safer conversational ground in that direction, "but we had to extradite you from Mexico as an illegal alien. There's a certain irony in that, I suppose."

"I didn't even know we were heading south," Jake told him, bitterly. "I guess I'll be forgetting which way's up next. But I can still die with a clean sheet. You can put that on my tombstone if you like. *Here lies Jake,*

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died with a clean sheet. Better set up a spy-eye so you can look out of your window at it any time you like. Show your kid, if you ever get around to having one. One's still the ration, I suppose, for all right-thinking immortals?"

He didn't add *We could've had two, if we'd wanted to.* It was true; he and Martha could have, if they hadn't had a conscience about Third World overcrowding. Nobody had known way back then that the next generation wouldn't have to *bother* with dying, or that the surplus personnel of the Third World would simply come and set up house in the interstices of the First.

"Don't be like that, Dad," Sam said. His voice was light, but he meant it.

"I *am* like that," Jake retorted, stubbornly. "Always was, always will be."

Doreen finally had to get back to work; however uncertain they might be, the world's futures still had to be bought and sold. Sam stayed for a while longer.

"You had a bad shock, I guess," Sam said.

"Let that be a lesson to me," Jake countered. "It's dangerous out there, what with all these crazy *old* people. A man can lose his best friend as easy as snapping his fingers."

"Was the monkey really your best friend?" Sam asked, skeptically—displaying a perspicacity of which even the tamarin's clever biochip might have been incapable.

"No," Jake admitted. "I've spent too much time with smart machines to start grieving for one. It's not like losing Martha was, not in a million years. Don't say I won't *miss* him, mind. Hard to find people I have that much in common with."

"Doesn't it get a little claustrophobic, talking all the time with an echo?"

"About as claustrophobic as a cell on Death Row with a million windows and a doorway to a thousand virtual worlds. Okay, so he wasn't really as smart as he sounded—who is?"

"You never used to call it *he* when it was alive," Sam observed. "You never even gave it a name."

"Maybe they ought to make them with sexual organs," Jake said. "Just for decoration, of course. It'd be easier to give them names if they were one thing or the other. It'd be easier to think of them as real animals. I mean, that's the idea, isn't it? We're *supposed* to be able to think of them as real animals, just like us. That way, we really might be able to make friends with them, the way we sometimes can with one another."

"Someone called from the Village," Sam told him. "Saw the news, wanted to know if you were okay. Name of Peterson. Was he a friend?"

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"Not really."

"Good of him to call, though."

"Not really."

Sam sat down on the bed and looked his father right in the eye. "If you want to die, Dad, you *can,*" he said, very soberly. "It's easy enough. If you want to live and get nothing out of it, that's even easier. It must be hell, having fallen through a trapdoor that was sealed and made safe a few years after it caught you. I ask the same question, you know: *Why you?* I hear the same answer: *Why anybody?* Whenever it came along, *someone* was bound to miss out: a whole generation. I won't try to fan the flames by saying that they might still discover a way to undo damage already done, although they might. All I'll say is that I'd feel a lot happier and a lot prouder if *my* father was one of the guys who did his level best to make the most of the time he *had,* even though he'd lost almost everything that made what he had seem worth having. But then, I always was a selfish little toad, wasn't I? Comes of being an only child, I guess. In the future, there'll *only* be only children. What a world, hey?"

Jake said nothing, because there was nothing he could say that wouldn't make him seem like an old fool. He wriggled and writhed a bit, knowing that the physician would read it as a sign of increasing discomfort and up the endorphin input. He figured that it was time to float for a while, and to feel sensibly detached.

"I'll come in and see how you are in a little while," Sam said. "Doreen'll pop in and out when she can. You want peace and quiet and all those wires out, you'll have to recover. Okay?"

"Sure," said Jake. "I'll be fine. Back on my feet in no time."

"I've moved the window nearer the bed," Sam pointed out, as he paused in the doorway, "so you can see out."

"Thanks," Jake said, lukewarmly.

At first, he turned away from the window, and even shut his eyes for a while, but he couldn't go to sleep. In the end, he turned back again, to face the reconfigured wall. Beyond the imaginary window-pane, snow was gently falling on a meadow.

After watching the scene for a few tedious minutes, Jake found the remote control and switched off the snow. Then he switched off the meadow. Idly, he started surfing through the channels.

Worlds came and went, each one flaring up in a blaze of light and then dying. Some of them were here and now, others elsewhere and anywhere, in the present or the distant past or possible futures or pasts that might have been but never were. Jake couldn't tell the real ones from the unreal at this sort of pace; they were all whirled in together, all part and parcel of the same infinitely confused and infinitely confusing whole.

What an old fool I am, Jake thought, *trying to go anywhere and nowhere on the highway, when all the anywheres and nowheres anyone*

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could ever want to see are right outside my window. But he knew, even as he thought it, that the window was really a wall, just like the one Central Traffic Control had thrown across the highway: a wall to keep him from getting *out,* no matter how fast or how far he decided to go.

He could see *everything*—a world of infinite possibility, full of people, young and old—but he couldn't actually *go* there. He wriggled around a bit, to remind the invisible physician's programs that he was still there, still in distress.

It could be worse, he reminded himself, sternly. *It could be a great deal worse, and a man my age should be wise enough to count his blessings. At least I have a son, and a home, and a few more heartbeats to count—and I have a window right next to my bed.*

He waited, numbly, for the brave words to take effect. He was sure that they would, if he only gave them enough time and cajoled enough endorphins from the systems hidden in the wall. They *had* to. What else was there to take comfort from but words, shaped and given life by bravery?

By slow degrees, the caress of the clean sheets on his bruised and careworn skin became breathtakingly and luxuriously soft. Somehow, it reminded him of Martha, of fine sand warmed and glittered by the sun, and of the tenderness of youth.

For the moment, at least, it was something he didn't want to lose. ●

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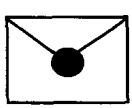

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Marina Fitch

THE BALANCE IN THE STORM

Marina Fitch lives near the strawberry fields in Watsonville, California, an agricultural town not far from Santa Cruz. She works as a child associate or "special friend," playing with children one-on-one in The Playroom—"a magical realm above the school cafeteria." The job leaves her with plenty of time and energy for writing. Inspiration for "The Balance in the Storm," her first tale for *Asimov's*, came "while suffering from a bad case of homesickness. I have not, much to my husband's relief, had to resort to any of the remedies of the story."

Illustration by Pat Morrissey

A word of warning: There are brief scenes of violence in this story that may be disturbing to some.

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Two peppermint pinwheels weighted down the check. I reached for one, hesitated, and then withdrew my hand.

"You can have both of them," Paul said. "I don't like them."

I wrinkled my nose. "Neither do I."

But I took both candies anyway and slipped them into my jacket pocket, for later. Not to eat, but to balance in my hand—old life, new life. The Borderlands and the mortal world.

Paul put his arm around me as we stepped from the restaurant into the autumn night. The faint odor of disinfectant and wet dog still haunted him. "Deidre, you're so funny sometimes," he said. "Why did you take the mints if you don't like them?"

"Habit," I said. I brushed the yellow brick of the restaurant's façade with my fingers, as if the roughness of the brick could wear away the unbidden memory: Tyrene's changeling, the blonde child with the large brown eyes, smiling up at me as I returned from the mortal world, this world, and handed her the red-and-white mints. The changeling fancied them; her eyes sparkled with that transient delight only mortals know.

I loved the changeling's smile, the way it spread across her face like a rush of Spring. I loved watching her grow. By the time I returned to the Borderlands, the changeling would be an old woman—or dead. A shudder jerked me to a stop. I wrapped my jacket tighter, trying to warm the tears frozen in my throat, warm them till they evaporated and were gone. I rubbed the candies between my fingers. "Habit," I said again.

"You okay?" Paul asked, pulling me close.

"Just remembering."

"Homesick?"

I nodded. "A little."

"Thinking about your sister Irene?"

"Yes," I said, glad I'd only coated the truth with a thin lie.

"Hey, it's only been three months," he said. "It's hard to move to a new city. To leave everything you know."

I wound my arm around his waist and clutched the soft wool of his jacket. You don't know the half of it, I wanted to say. I looked at him, at the honey-brown hair feathered over his smooth scalp, at the gray-brown eyes glossy as polished river stones, at the round, fleshy cheeks. An orange tabby padded toward us and Paul knelt to scratch the offered head. His affection for the little cat warmed me. I smiled. I left my world for you, I thought, I shifted forms. I left the river. To feign mortality till you die, Paul. All of this for you.

I met Paul at the Whistling River. I floated beneath the cool, muddy surface of the stream, my nostrils flared to drink in the scent of decaying rushes and duckweed. With a snort, I rippled the water, pressing my ears flat to my head and grinding my teeth as he wandered into view.

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He overturned rocks with his walking stick, pausing to examine the beetles and ants that swarmed in the imprinted mud.

My heart quickened. A spritz of saliva moistened my mouth as I readied myself to lunge from the water. My hooves would pull me up the bank in a flurry of moist clods and ruined grass, my coat sleek with algae. I would then tear the flesh from his bones with a wrench of my teeth and feast on that succulent mortal flesh.

Before I moved, he spotted me. He cried out, shucking off his day pack and setting it on a rock. Then he clambered down to the river's edge. "My God," he said. "Poor little fella."

I imagined myself through his eyes: a dead pony bound by the rushes, the bones of the right foreleg and chest exposed, a rime of pus coating the slit throat. I shifted form a little, filming my eyes with a white glaze. My sight dimmed; small price to pay for a morsel such as this. Then he waded into the river and gazed into my eyes. His face, puckered with concern, radiated a kindness, a gentility I little expected.

Without hesitation, he pulled my head to him. "I bet you were a pretty thing," he said, stroking my forelock. "Let's get you out of the water so you don't poison the animals downstream."

He tugged me to shore, grunting in short bursts as he dragged me partway onto the pebbled strand. All the while he murmured to me, clucking his tongue and stroking my tangled mane. His eyes promised things, gentle, loving things a fairy rarely finds, and a kelpie like myself, never. I let him shore my body with stones so that I wouldn't wash downstream. I hungered for him but no longer for the taste of him.

"I'll be back, little fella," he said, caressing my muzzle. His eyes widened as he caught sight of my slit throat for the first time. He probed the wound with a finger, then lurched to his feet. "What kind of monster would do such a thing? God, people make me sick!"

I waited until he was out of sight, then shifted to a woman's body. I cast a spell of illusion over a pile of rocks on the river bank, creating a dead pony of glamour and stone. I rubbed my naked arms. Holding the illusion tired me too much to clothe myself in glamour as well. Frantic, I scoured the area until I found a pair of torn sweat pants and a flannel shirt, both from previous victims. I returned and crouched beside the "pony." Voices approached.

"With a practice in the city, I don't get many horses, mostly dogs and cats—" Paul's words trailed off when he spotted me.

"Hello, ma'am," the ranger said.

I looked up at them. "I came up here for the day," I said. My voice quavered. "I was following the river—I saw it—poor little fella. What kind of bastard would do something like this?"

Paul knelt beside me. He patted my arm. A warm kinship shone in his eyes. As soon as he and the ranger dragged the "pony" away from

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the river, the ranger left to get help. Paul pulled a thermos of coffee from his day pack and offered me a cup. To quiet my nerves, he said. I accepted it gladly.

"You know, I usually don't like people much," he said.

I smiled over the plastic cup. "Me neither."

As soon as we drove out of the restaurant's parking lot, the mist which had blanketed the city all evening dissolved into a pattering storm. Paul and I returned to the house, our house, and Paul built a fire. I stood by the window, gazing beyond the fat drops trickling down the pane, saw my past beneath the curtain of rain: the rush-choked river, the water rippling and plashing over round stones; the verdancy of the Borderlands, the hills and woodlands unscathed by farming or industry; my fairy kin fading from world to world, a trace of ferity glittering in every eye, shadowing every smile.

Paul massaged my shoulders, then slid his arms around my waist and pulled me close. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Fine," I said. I folded my hand over his. "Just thinking."

Thinking about Tyrene, her slender, gauze-pale arms entwining the neck of some mortal poet or writer foolish enough to call out to her, mistaking the possessive leanan-sidhe for a muse. Thinking about the warm suck of the mud as my hooves sank into the soft river bed. Thinking about the current combing my mane, loosening the weeds tangled through my hair. Thinking about who I was.

"I've never felt close to anyone before," Paul said. "I don't ever want to lose you. To anything." He kissed my neck. "I love you."

I pressed my back to his chest, wrapping his arms around me like a cloak. A calm touched me. In that instant, I knew why I was there. "I love you, too," I said.

The calm carried me through the rest of the evening and into our love-making, although for a fleeting moment as I straddled Paul, rocking with the rhythm of each upward thrust, burning deliciously with the hard fullness of him, a thrill of maliciousness ached through me. I ground my teeth, my lips curling back. I wanted to shift, just slightly, feel the power of my equine jaws. I wanted to bite his cheek, taste the blood as it spurted into my mouth, hot and salty, a climax of another kind.

I closed my eyes and thrust my pelvis down, pushing him deeper inside me until he came with a gasp. He tried to pull me down to kiss me, but I resisted. When he finally lay still under me, my desire to shift had passed. I let him reel me into an embrace.

After he fell asleep, I slipped from the bed and returned to the window. The rain pelted the eucalyptus trees and the yellowed lawn in the backyard. Water pooled in the round planters that held the small orange

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trees. I had felt safe coming here because there was so little water, because the river that flowed through town was only a trickle. I thought I could avoid missing my own river if I never saw one, but this storm raged like my river, it sang like my river. I pressed my palm to the glass but could not touch the rain.

"God, it's great to get all this rain," Paul said next morning over breakfast.

The storm had blustered all night. I knew because I stood at the window till just before six, till just before the radio alarm sounded. My jaw still hurt from gnashing my teeth, a lather of madness foaming on my hairless skin as I stood at the window. Nose to glass, I had snorted patches of fog onto the pane, a whinny caught in my throat.

I reached for the pitcher of orange juice. "How long has there been a drought?"

"Three years," he said. He reached across the table and took my hand. "Just wait. This place really comes alive with a little water. All the hills turn green. And the river—well, it *becomes* a river."

Becomes a river. . . . Again I thought about the measure of safety I'd felt in coming here, no river to tempt me. Without a river, I'd reasoned, I could grow comfortable with the city, learn to live as mortals did. And by the time the weather cycled into a wet period, the homesickness would be over and the urge to shift to my kelpie form would be muted, possibly gone. I could feign mortality until Paul died, enjoy the fragility of his tenuous life.

I tried to inject a lightness into my voice. "How long do you think it will rain?"

"Hard to say. It could end in half an hour, it could last all week." He sighed. "I hope it lasts all week. I hope it lasts all winter. It'd be nice to take a long shower once in awhile and not feel guilty."

I laughed, squeezing his hand. "A shower?"

He reached across the table with his free hand and cupped the back of my head. "Maybe a bath—a long, hot bath with scented oil and you."

He pulled me into a kiss. His tongue flicked across my teeth and probed my mouth. The urgency of it coursed through my blood with a raging sweetness. Without ending the kiss, I slid from the table and slithered into his lap. His response pressed against my inner thigh. I positioned myself so that his penis nudged against my genitals. His penis swelled in answer to the shudder that sped through my body.

"I'm going to be late for work," he whispered.

"Only if you keep talking," I said.

By the time we both bucked into climax, the linoleum beneath me was slick with sweat, slick as mud. I turned my face from Paul's, locking my

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jaw to keep from nipping him. Outside, the rain gutters along the roof sloshed, a torrent sluicing down the spout with the gush of a waterfall.

Paul left for the veterinary clinic. I paced beside the window, tossing my head occasionally, my hair rippling as it resettled on my back. Three months I'd been here, three months, and until the peppermint candies and the rain, I'd missed neither my equine form nor my world. Oh, for a second here and there, but not with this restless sadness. And the things that I ached for seemed so ridiculous: the reflection of Tyrene in the changeling's eyes, the rhythm of the fairy dance, the mud hardening to my coat.

I stopped pacing. With my foot extended before me, I dragged my toe across the carpet. "Why am I here?" I demanded of the room.

The rain answered with a taunting hiss.

I stamped. "Why did I bind my spirit to this mortal?"

Because, I imagined Tyrene explaining, *without him as an anchor, you would be drawn back to the Borderlands. But until Death severs the bond between you, you must also remain here.*

"But *why?*" I asked again.

Only the longing for home filled my heart. I couldn't reach my feelings for Paul. Was it all sex? I wondered. A thrill tremored through me at the thought of his hands alternately gliding and kneading my arms as he entered me—But if that was all, why stay? I could easily have had my fill of him sexually and then gorged on his flesh. No, there was something more—his laughter, his smile, the look in his eyes. The look that promised gentle and fleeting things: love, hope, a future that was not his to offer—gifts of mortality.

I inhaled sharply. Gifts of mortality . . . now I understood Tyrene's need of the changeling, understood my own fascination with the child and with Paul. Like a rose, offering itself to the world for such a short time, Paul and the changeling bloomed and faded with a transient beauty.

My cheek pressed to the storm-chilled glass, I knew why the rain made me ache for the river.

Pushing myself away from the window, I trotted to the bedroom and pulled on a sweatshirt and a pair of jeans. I looked at my shoes, then kicked them under the bed. With a tug, I pulled my jacket from the peg beside the door as I darted out of the house. I paused for a minute—take the station wagon or walk? Walk.

The caress of the rain and wind calmed me. My skin itched, the dampness oozing through the sweatshirt to moisten my arms and breasts. I tossed the jacket to the front step. Face upturned to greet each drop, I wandered down the street. I walked past maples that waded in their own glistening red leaves, past lawns blushing green beneath a crust of

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dry yellow. My bare feet popped the bubbles of mud that streamed across the sidewalk. Nostrils flared, I sucked in great quantities of the rain-washed air.

I wandered for blocks, past houses sweating with storm, past convenience stores and flooded lawns, until suddenly I stood—by chance—on the banks of the river.

Swollen with two days' rain, the pathetic trickle now flowed in a respectable, if small, stream. Hypnotized by the churning waters, rich with silt, I stood rigid on the bank near the Ninth Street Bridge. I imagined the gurgle of the water over my shoulders and haunches, tickling my belly. My mouth watered at the memory of duckweed and cattails. One shift, here, with no one looking. One shift, just to feel my hooves rake the mud-rich bank. I closed my eyes, fighting the urge—

"Hey, lady, you got a dollar?"

My eyes snapped open.

"Lady, a dollar. You got a dollar?"

I touched my face with my hand; still human. I turned and stared at the shabby man beside me. "No," I said through gritted teeth.

Somehow encouraged, the man stepped closer. Soggy crumbs encrusted his reddish beard. Despite the rain, his skin looked dirty, as if stained with grime. "Come on, lady, like you got to have something. Quarter?"

Hot saliva filled my mouth. "I think you better leave," I said.

He squared his shoulders, the worn black overcoat stretched thin across his chest. "Hey, don't threaten *me*. I live under that fucking bridge. You're trespassing, sweetheart. You're in *my* world. So come on, you got a dollar?"

"I think," I repeated slowly, "you better leave."

"No way, bitch," he said, grabbing my arm. He thrust his hand into my front pocket.

I grasped his wrist. "I warned you," I said. "I have nothing you want, but you're tempting me. You have something I want very much."

I pushed him backward, knocking him off his feet, then planted a foot firmly in his stomach. Once I made the shift, I would never be able to hold onto his wrist. Hands are for holding. Hooves, especially a kelpie's hooves, are for something very different. He struggled to sit up. I stamped down into his stomach, hard. The air escaped him in a rush. Even standing over him I could smell the bourbon on his breath.

I let the shift surge through me, hot, like lightning sparking from muscle to muscle, bone to bone. Light flashed through my mind, obliterating all thought for a second. Then I tumbled forward as my back bowed and my arms lengthened. My front hooves smashed to the earth above the man's head. I reared up, dropping to pin his shoulders with a crush

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of my front hooves while my hind legs kicked free. One of my rear hooves struck his ankle and shattered it.

He screamed, a cry that thinned to a piercing wail. I tossed my head side to side to rid my ears of that irritating whine. My lips curled away from my teeth. He shrieked louder. With a bellow, I reached for his face, champing down, hard, his nose and Adam's apple brought together in one sharp, quick bite. The scream ended.

Blood filled my mouth, warm and sticky, only to dribble down my neck. I tossed my head, ripping the face apart, then gnawed through the top of the skull, licking and sucking at the brain. Contentment filled me as I feasted, bourbon and cheap wine permeating each bite.

I chewed through the chest, my teeth puncturing a lung, until someone shouted. I looked up. A man bundled in torn sweaters stared at me, his cheeks cloud white above his black beard. I snarled at him. After a half second, he turned and ran.

With my teeth, I dragged the carcass to the river by its pant leg and set it drifting on the current. I plunged in after it, butting the body to rest under the bridge, then shifted. Lightning, brightness—I huddled naked beside my victim, my clothes apparently shredded by the swelling of my kelpie form. A shiver rippled through me. With a sigh, I shucked the remains of the body from the long black overcoat. As I slid my arms into the sleeves, I nearly gagged at the stench of sweat and old vomit. I steeled myself. If I was to get home, I had to wear this rag.

I ran when I could, jumping over the puddles and mud floes that spilled across sidewalks and streets, hugging the coat tight around me. On reaching home, I ripped the thing from my body and dropped it in the entry. I sank to the floor, leaning against the far wall. Pleased and disappointed, I watched the black fabric slowly crumple. I had promised myself I would live as a mortal. A pool of water seeped from beneath the black folds.

"I found your jacket on the front step," Paul said. He held the sodden thing by a sleeve, dangling it over the floor. "Why was it outsi—"

I kissed him, deep and probing, pressing the length of my body against his. The jacket thwacked the floor. Gasping for breath, he wove his fingers through my hair and tilted my head back. "Hello," he said breathlessly. He kissed me again, then looked into my eyes. "That's quite a welcome. You look . . . a little wild, kind of . . . dangerous."

I smiled—seductively, I hoped. "I am," I said, then unbuttoned his shirt. As I tugged at his belt buckle, he swept me off my feet and carried me into the bedroom. I managed to undo the belt by the time he set me on the bed.

After our passion—my passion—was spent, Paul moaned and rolled onto his back. He reached for me, pulling me to his chest. A tremor shot

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through me as the memory of climax brushed my mind, then I stilled. I cupped my right hand over his chest.

"Oh, Deidre," he murmured.

I nuzzled him, but my heart weighed heavy in my breast. I had given in to my fairy nature and while the restlessness had abated, my doubts had grown. Why was I here? What drew me to this man besides this passion? Besides his mortality? I relaxed the cup of my hand and spread my fingers wide across his chest.

"That was wonderful," Paul said.

"I needed you."

"Needed me? You can need me any time!" Then he smoothed the hair from my face and sat up a little. "Hey, what's wrong? You look so lost."

"I guess I am a little."

"Why did you need me? Was I enough?"

I buried my face in his neck, forcing him to recline again. "Yes," I lied. "More than enough."

I couldn't tell him I needed to make love to him to persuade myself I could make it here in this world as a near mortal creature, that there was something for me here. Now, as our bodies cooled and the evening shadows crept into the room, I shivered inside, more confused than before. I swallowed, and remembered the taste of the ragged man's brain.

Paul stroked my shoulder. "God, Deidre, you were an animal."

I started and pulled away.

"Hey, hey," he said soothingly, drawing me close again. "I was kidding. It's just—you were such a tiger."

I rested my head on his shoulder and let the tension seep from my body. "No, not a tiger," I said.

Weariness hit me. The entire day—the doubts, the longing, the shift, the feasting, the anxiety, the passion—collapsed inside me. I slept.

Next morning the clouds dispersed and the sun shone. Within days the river dwindled to a trickle. The peppermint pinwheels melted into lumps in my jacket pocket; I threw the candies out and took the jacket to the cleaners. The local paper carried an inch-long story about the remains of a homeless man found under the Ninth Street Bridge. That night at dinner I turned to vegetarianism when I realized I was comparing the succulence of my lightly browned steak to the homeless man's chest. My mood lifted and I reveled in my feigned mortality, delighting in the subtle changes wrought by Time, changes in Paul and changes in me.

I washed the dead man's overcoat, in case I needed it.

A month and a half took us through fall and into winter. Paul bought me flowers once a week, autumn-colored lilies and mums, white carnations and vermilion roses. I discovered a liveliness in his talk that captivated me and an open-mindedness, a willingness to believe, that

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intrigued me as much as his love for animals and his dislike of most people. I settled into him, no longer questioning why I was with him, no longer homesick.

Then the rain returned.

Gentle as a flurry of blossoms in spring, the rain danced over the world. It rained for two days, three, and in my mind I imagined the creek rising, rising, until it bubbled and frothed, so like my river. Mud on my skin, Tyrene and her changeling, the taste of blood—my thoughts became a river, tumbling me from my assurance. More and more often I went to the closet, parting the clothes so that I could reach in and finger the black overcoat.

"It's been raining all week," Paul said one night as we got ready for bed. He peeked from behind the drapes at the fat drops reflecting back the bedroom light. "This is what it was like when I was a kid. It rained like this from October till March. We never had to worry about five minute showers or whether or not we could wash the car." He laughed. "And we didn't feel guilty if we had a lawn."

He laced his fingers through mine and pulled me close. I drew away from the window. "It's December," I said. "Will it really rain till March?"

"If we're lucky." He sighed. "But probably not."

That night I watched him as he slept, afraid to touch him. Tempted by the roundness of his cheeks, the softness of his chest, I slipped from the bed and went to the bathroom, locking the door. I gripped the edge of the sink, staring at my reflection in the mirror, willing myself to stay human, squelching my kelpie nature. *Kill him*, a voice inside me whispered, *and you can go home. Kill him, and stop fighting yourself. Kill him.*

I tossed my head, my hair whipping across my shoulders. With a snort, I glared into my reflected eyes. My lips curled back to expose yellowed, equine teeth. My jaw lengthened, my nostrils spread and flared. My head spun with the heat—

"Deidre? Deidre, are you all right?"

I closed my eyes, reversing the shift. My face tingled.

"Deidre?" Paul knocked at the door. "Honey, are you all right?"

I massaged my human jaw, then said, "I'm fine. Just a little restless, that's all. I didn't want to wake you."

"Come out and let me hold you. Do you need to talk?"

I placed a hand on the knob, shaking with uncertainty. Would I eat him or lie with him? I opened the door. And let him lead me to bed.

I watched Paul back out of the driveway, water pinwheeling around his tires as he drove through puddles. His wipers winked back and forth, unable to defeat the rain. I waited until his car disappeared around the corner, then walked slowly to the closet. I shed my clothes, piling them beside the open door, then reached for the black overcoat.

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Kill Paul and go home, I mused, or kill someone else and try to work through this homesickness. I slid the coat over my nakedness, buttoning it, then went to the front door and walked out into the storm.

Mud overran the entire street, percolating big, sticky bubbles where yellowed lawns used to be, cascading in silt-blackened waterfalls from the sidewalks to the gutters. Longing ached through me. I wandered, oblivious, seeing nothing but the rain's gray film until I stopped on the banks of the river.

I blinked. Again that meager trickle had swollen into a rage of water. Again the concrete arches of the Ninth Street Bridge rose beside me, pitted surfaces scarred with graffiti: "Conserving water in the new desert" in blue spray paint and "Bloods" in red. The one seemed ironic, the other prophetic. I snorted, a chuckle rumbling deep in my throat. The waters churned past, dredging mud and bits of weed just as my mind dredged images of home.

"Wonderful, isn't it?" a soft voice said beside me.

I turned. A woman in navy sweats and a hooded yellow slicker stood beside me, gazing at the river. "The river?" I asked.

"The rain," she said. "God, do we ever need it!"

I looked around. No one drove or walked across the bridge. No one strolled along the footpath that followed the levee. I smiled at the woman, my gaze settling on her thick, meaty hands. We were alone, she and I, the only witnesses to the storm-ravaged day.

"Yes, it is wonderful," I said, and unbuttoned the overcoat.

I left her liver among the stubbled grass at the water's edge. Walking home, the overcoat pulled tight around me, I sorted my confusion. Despite the calm that flowed through me, regret seeped in, poisoning my revived determination. I thought about Paul; I wanted to stay with him, but I needed to touch on what I was or the homesickness, the longing would drive me mad. It was an infrequent pleasure, in any event. And if I didn't eat Paul—

Tires sputtered as a white car careened to a halt inches from me in a shriek of brakes and a blast of horn. Bewildered, I frowned, then realized that I stood in the middle of Westermere Street.

The engine ground, then rumbled back to life. After a second, the windshield wipers scraped rhythmically across the glass. I gazed at the driver, a thin man with a wide, flat nose and a snarl of black hair. He blasted the horn again, gestured at me with his middle finger, then leaned out the window, shouting, "Stupid bitch! You got a death wish or something? Asshole!"

The calm dissipated. I glared at him, then wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, a smear of blood thinning from red to pink with the steady rain. I tossed my head back and bared my teeth at the man, my

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nostrils flaring. The shift blazed through my torso and down one leg. I gripped the lapels of the overcoat and flashed the driver, revealing the barrel chest and scruffy haunches of my kelpie form. My rear horse leg curved in a prancing posture to accommodate my human leg. The man's face paled as he stared at me. His lower lip quivered. I smiled, a rush of hatred urging me on. My equine leg pulsed with change, the flesh searing away until only clean white bone remained. The man's face—eyes wide, mouth slack—froze as the car lurched and died. The wipers stopped.

I closed the overcoat, then shifted torso and leg back to human form. I walked the rest of the way across the street, turning slowly as someone screamed. I glanced at the driver. He still stared ahead at the spot where I had stood; saliva trickled from one corner of his shapeless mouth. The scream continued, broken by lung-slamming gasps. I looked around. A man stood on the far corner, his fingers raking his face as he keened on. Beside him stood a boy in a thick corduroy jacket. When my gaze met his, he too shrieked in terror.

Other cries rose up behind me. I swung 'round. Two women and an old man backed away from me. I held the overcoat closed and ran down the street, past the women and the old man.

"Good move, Deidre, good move," I muttered. "Let the world know what you are. Small price to pay to ease the homesickness, you stupid kelpie."

My bare feet smacked the sidewalk in rebuke. The blocks seemed endless, then suddenly I was on our street. I darted into the house and bolted the door.

Paul reached for his orange juice, his gaze riveted on the morning paper. "This is too weird," he said, finally looking up at me. "Look at this!"

I took the front page from him. My fingers tightened, my nails scoring my palm through the newsprint. "Night Mare Shreds Woman," the headline read. "In a scene suggestive of Stephen King, a horse dragged a woman into the river near the Ninth Street Bridge yesterday and tore her apart, devouring everything but her liver. . . ."

I sucked on my lower lip. "That's crazy," I said. I read on. The article quoted two witnesses, one a homeless man, the other a retired police officer. Each described the horse in detail, remarking on its savagery. Then the writer tied in a police report about six people treated for shock after sighting "a monster in a black overcoat, half horse, half woman, who began to decay before their eyes." The medical authorities claimed it was a shared hallucination. I set the paper on the table and slid it away from me.

"Bizarre, huh?" Paul said. "I wonder what the real story is."

I shrugged.

Paul turned his plate, slowly, distractedly, and said, "Do you remember the pony we found at the Whistling River the day I met you?"

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Warmth drained from me. "Yes."

Paul sucked on his lower lip. "I was afraid to say anything—I was sure you'd think I was crazy. But when I first found the pony, I had the feeling it was alive, that it was aware of me. Poor little thing. I don't know what made me think of it. Maybe the description of the woman in the overcoat."

He turned his plate again. "You know, when I went to the ranger station to report the pony, the rangers were talking about finding human livers on the riverbank."

"How weird," I said.

"Yeah," he said. "And then the rocks. . . ." He laughed nervously, then shook himself. "Listen, don't let me forget my umbrella. I can't believe all the rain we're getting."

It rained all day. I paced beside the living room window. Across the way, one of the neighbor's saplings, a Japanese maple, listed then slid to its side, the roots unable to anchor it in the liquid earth.

At noon I turned on the television to listen to the news. Police were scouring the river for the berserk horse, the victim had been identified by a scrap of her yellow slicker, the river continued to swell. No danger yet, but—I shut off the television and returned to the window. Within seconds I resumed pacing.

My fairy nature rankled. The resolve I had felt the day before vanished as the water filmed the glass before me, caressed it as it had caressed me. I shivered. I wanted to go home, to wallow in my river, to take the hand of Tyrene's changeling and run along the curving bank. I shut my eyes tight. Paul, Paul, Paul, I thought. I imagined him brushing the hair from my eyes, appreciation teasing his lips into a smile. I imagined his warm voice as he described the attentions of a particularly affectionate cat, only to interrupt himself to say, "You're so special, Deidre, you really are." Imagined the concern in his eyes when he watched me sometimes, the concern and the love. And behind each image of Paul the river rose, strong and deep and beckoning.

I pressed my eyes shut tighter still. My heartbeat throbbed in my temples. The river flowed over its banks, reaching for me in trickles and gushes, calling me home. I opened my eyes and still the river bubbled through my thoughts.

In desperation, I went to the front and back doors, locking myself in. I stayed inside all that day—

—and most of the next. The storm, steady as my own longing, washed away the world. I listened to the news: the monstrous horse was forgotten as the National Guard was called in to sandbag the river and the downtown area.

The power went down shortly after two. Paul called three times to check on me. I tried to imagine the changeling's eyes in his face, but my

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homesickness poisoned me. He seemed a stranger. I hung up and went to the back door. Shucking off my clothes, I stepped naked into the sodden back yard.

Rain sluiced over me. My feet sunk in the cloying mud. I lifted my face to the clouds and sucked the rain from my upper lip. The ache was too great. With a moan, I let the lightning jolt through me. I shifted.

My hooves slammed to the ground, spattering slush and drowned grass in a fine spray. I snorted and tossed my head, prancing the tight perimeter of the fence, then dropped to my knees. I rolled onto my back, foal-foolish, in the luscious mud. I whinnied my delight to the storm. It answered with a sudden burst, then as quickly slowed to its usual steady patter. A swish of my tail flung mud at the house.

I wallowed for awhile, my coat smooth with slime, then rolled to my feet and shifted. I studied the yard. A rounded crater filled with water. How I would explain that to Paul, I didn't know. If the rain continued, the soil would float and sift to fill the hole, or at the least create a lunarscape. Paul would hardly wonder at that.

The rain rinsed most of the mud from my body. I hugged myself, then turned to go inside. My gaze settled on Mr. Greene, the old man next door, his eyes unreadable, shadowed by the brim of his gray Stetson. His mouth hung open, then shut so tight that his lips thinned and disappeared. We stared at each other for a full minute, then I rushed inside.

I paced the bedroom, peeking at Mr. Greene's house every time I passed the window. Finally I stopped in front of the dresser and caught sight of myself in the mirror. If Paul saw me like this, mud dripping from my hair. . . .

I went into the bathroom and turned on the shower. As I climbed under the nozzle, the water thinned to a drizzle, then stopped. Cursing, I marched out of the bathroom and back into the bedroom.

The phone was ringing. I hesitated, then picked it up. "Hello?"

"Are you all right?" Paul asked.

I thought about Mr. Greene. "Yes, I think so. The water's out."

"The river's starting to flood. I'm coming home. I don't want to get stranded at the clinic."

"Oh. Good idea." Cold dread swept through me. I tried to infuse a little affection into my voice. "Hurry home."

"As soon as I can. A few of the roads are already closed. I, uh . . . I love you." He hung up.

The dread deepened to panic. If he came home now, I might . . . I picked up the receiver. The line was dead.

I set the receiver in its cradle. The rain boiled the dusk into evening, darkening the world. I imagined the river spilling over the levee, imagined the sidewalks becoming the banks of a hundred tributaries. I massaged my temples, trying to remember every detail of Paul's face. Mr.

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Greene's time-worn features obscured it. If I wanted to stay, if I had the remotest desire to stay, I had to take care of Mr. Greene. I went to the closet to retrieve the black overcoat.

I pounded on Mr. Greene's door. The storm gusted around me, flapping the hem of the overcoat. I pounded again, then swung around as the redwood sapling in his front yard slammed to the ground with a crack. Behind me, the door banged open. I turned.

Mr. Greene trembled in the doorway, a pistol clutched in both hands. "Get thee behind me, Satan," he said. He clicked off the safety.

I smiled and let the overcoat slip from my shoulders. "Not Satan," I said. "Far older."

I let the storm raging inside me consume me. Electricity sparked limb to limb as the shift took me. I screamed to the rain and the wind, then smashed the gun from his hands with my front hooves. The gun went off, the bullet grazing my flank. A well of pus erupted along my hide. I thrust my muzzle in his face. The flesh rotted from my flared nostrils in weeping sores, the decay searing away my lips to bare my teeth. Mr. Greene gurgled and clutched his chest, sinking to his knees.

A heart attack, I thought. Much better than tearing him apart so close to home.

I reared, reining in the heat so that the shift flowed slowly from horse to woman. I leaned over him, wondering if he was really dead. I picked up his gun and, aiming at his chest, shot him—

—just as a car splashed down the street, its headlights washing over me. The headlights illuminated me for a full half minute before the car skated to a stop. I snatched at the overcoat and raced toward home.

I glanced at the car as I pushed open the front door. Paul stared at me, his face white in the car's yellow interior light. I dashed inside.

It wasn't till I got to the bedroom that I realized I still had the gun.

I dropped it on the dresser, backing away from it. I waited in the dark bedroom. Minutes passed. I paced before the end of the bed, my body on fire with the need to change. Finally footsteps padded into the house, creeping forward slowly, cautiously. I imagined muddy shoe prints leading from the entry through the living room until they caught up with Paul. I dropped to a crouch, shivering despite the heat flowing through my body.

Paul's voice echoed in the dark hall. "Deidre?"

I swallowed, trying to calm myself, trying to feel the chill of the powerless house.

His voice was sweet and tight. "Deidre, honey, where are you?"

Tears filmed my eyes. Damn it, Paul, I wanted to shout, don't do this to me! Don't be so sweet! Don't make it so hard! I gnashed my teeth as I strained to keep the shift in check.

His footsteps slowed at the bedroom door. The dresser banged against

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the wall as he stumbled into it. He grasped at the top of the dresser to steady himself. His face floated like a moon in the darkness. "Deidre. . .?"

"Don't come near me," I said. "I don't want to hurt you."

Metal rocked against wood, then stopped. Paul swallowed. "The horse—Mr. Greene called—"

"That was me."

His voice grew cold. "I know."

"You know!" I snorted. "Bullshit, you *know!*"

The moon, his face, drifted closer. Below, one empty hand trailed like a star, a shooting star, the splay of fingers its shimmering tail as it rose to join the other hand—the hand holding the gun.

He pointed the gun at me. "You killed Mr. Greene and you . . . by the river. You ate that woman."

"I had to. It's what I am."

"But not me, you haven't killed me." His voice sounded pinched. "You could have. At the Whistling River."

Outside the rain hissed and spat. Wheels shooshed through puddles.

My body burned. The shift was too near, too urgent to be held at bay much longer. "Could have, many times. Might."

"Might," he said. "I can't live with this, Deidre. I love you, but I'd rather lose you—"

"You said you never wanted to live without me—"

"I can't live with this." He cleared his throat. "Get out of here, now. Go back to where you came from."

Bile rose in the back of my throat. I don't want to do this, I don't want to kill you, I wanted to shout. *Please*. "Or what?" I said. "You'll kill me?"

Paul leveled the gun at my head. "I'm giving you a chance, Deidre."

My stomach knotted. "A chance? I've bound my spirit to yours. I can't return to my own world till you die. And I won't stay here without you."

His voice dropped to a whisper. "You ripped them apart. Like a child tearing the legs off of a frog."

"Like a cougar taking down a doe," I said. "Like a cat with a praying mantis."

He shuddered, but managed to hold the gun steady. "I don't want to kill you. Just go. Please?"

I laughed bitterly. "Did you hear me? I can't, not while you're alive. It's you or me, Paul."

He groaned. "Oh, God."

A rustling sound whispered down the hallway. The answer to his prayer or mine?

A lump of tears formed in my throat. "I don't want to kill you either."

I screamed once, then let the lightening swell through my body. Like an orgasm long held back, the shift rent through me, wracking my body

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with the ecstasy of relief. I reared on my hind legs. My hooves slashed the air in front of me, then slammed to the carpet.

Paul aimed at my head. "Thank you, Deidre. Thank you for making it easier—"

"Police!" someone shouted. "Freeze!"

Startled, Paul swung toward the flashlight, gun still held high, finger on the trigger. I dropped to the carpet, reversing the shift as the shots rang out. Paul crumpled to the floor beside me. We lay head to head, staring into each other's eyes. Above us one of the police shouted to the other, "Get the hell out of the room. We don't know how many are in there."

Paul coughed blood.

"I couldn't kill you," I whispered. Not alone.

He blinked. The image of Tyrene's changeling filled my mind, those brown eyes alive with a transient passion for Tyrene. A glimpse of that same passion lingered in Paul's eyes—for me. Despite the reality of me, despite the terror. Then he died.

I sobbed and shook, wailing at the police. I struck at them with my fists, raining curses on them, hating them. One of them grasped my arms, threatening to cuff me if I didn't quiet down. The other tried to soothe me. I hated them both, hated them for helping me kill Paul. I gnashed my teeth, then calmed. After the first one released me, I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand.

"That's better," the soothing officer said.

The other sneered. "Let's get her to a hospital."

Both the police relaxed. The soothing one said, "Give her a minute, will you?"

I hugged myself, trying not to glare at them. Satisfied I was in shock, I guess, they turned again to Paul's body. I shifted.

I left their livers in the tub.

Slipping on the black overcoat, I left the house and walked slowly, savoring this mortal world, Paul's world. The buildings glistened with rain, the windows streaming with freshets, the stone and wood rippling with a silvery sheen. Lawns flowed with mud, cars waded through brackish water. People pressed their faces to car windows and house windows, watching their world become a river. I walked to the middle of the Ninth Street Bridge and stared into the water, imagining Tyrene and her changeling.

The changeling was growing older. Soon the balance would tip and she would cease to be a child, entering that awkward stage between girlhood and womanhood. And although she would still adore Tyrene, more and more often a look of independence would flicker across the

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changeling's face, a foreshadowing of self-preservation. The passion, the dedication would fade—

"Take her back," I whispered to the absent Tyrene, "or you will kill her."

Tyrene would only laugh, but I know.

I know.

I shucked off the overcoat, then dived into the roiling current and crossed into the Borderlands. ●

POSTCARD FROM A TIME TRAVELER

you see these days it's not all the possible futures
strung out like irregular pearls

not the truths of past history that concern me
but a call to just remember cleanly

from the machine in my own skull
all the time, I lost my heart

all the times when my father tried his best
to fix my stance and pitch one hard

or later when my mother let the paint fly
and I saw these worlds through her eyes

yes to somehow freeze this tide of moments
which unfrozen flows on past

to somehow say the truest feeling
somehow make it last awhile

and so I send along
a thing outdated and arcane

this small window on my secrets
(see reverse) a snapshot, a time frame

—Robert Frazier

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NEXT ISSUE

Our next issue is a very special issue indeed, our special November Double-Length Issue—which is special, among other reasons, because it is BIG enough (downright HUGE, in fact!) to give us room to include an astounding array of novellas, novelettes, and short stories, by both the Biggest Names in the business and the hot new stars of the future—pound for pound, one of the best reading values for your money that you can buy anywhere!

NOVEMBER COVER STORY

Pat Cadigan, one of our most popular writers, and twice winner of the prestigious Arthur C. Clarke Award, takes us to a hard-edged, high-tech future and deep inside the bizarre mirror-maze world of Virtual Reality gaming, to play one of the oldest games there is, the deadly and venerable game of murder, for the highest stakes of all, in a dazzling new novella that investigates a "Death in the Promised Land."

BIG-NAME AUTHORS

Multiple Nebula- and Hugo- Award-winner **Ursula K. Le Guin** gives us a bittersweet and brilliant look at a normal little town that is nowhere near as normal as it appears, in "Ether OR"; British writer **Brian Stableford** treats us to some wry adventures in "The Skin Trade"; recent Hugo-winner **Harry Turtledove** gives us a scary and unsettling tour of an all-too-likely Alternate America, in "Must and Shall"; Australian writer **Greg Egan** investigates a sinister high-tech mystery with the potential to forever change the nature of humanity itself, in "Tap"; **Robert Reed** gives us ringside seats for a harrowing battle fought to the death deep inside an alien spaceship bigger than the Earth, in a hard-hitting novella that relates the history of the secret war waged over "Aeon's Child"; and **Tom Purdom** takes us to the Moon in company with a self-styled future Casanova for a fast-paced, furious, and frenetic "Romance in Lunar G."

EXCITING NEW WRITERS

David Marusek takes us several decades down the Information Superhighway to a strange and bewilderingly complex new future where everyone and everything is plugged into everything else, for a vivid and pyrotechnic novella that tells the compelling story of a man who has it all, for a moment, anyway, in "We Were Out of Our Minds with Joy"; and **Tony Daniel** returns to introduce us to the world of intergalactic High Finance, where futures can literally be bought and sold, for prices far higher than cash, in the wild and madly inventive "No Love in All of Dwingeloo."

FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections," the "On Books" column, poems, cartoons, letters, and an array of other columns and features. Look for our jam-packed, couldn't-fit-another-thing-in-without-splitting-the-seams November Double Issue on sale on your newsstands on September 12, 1995.

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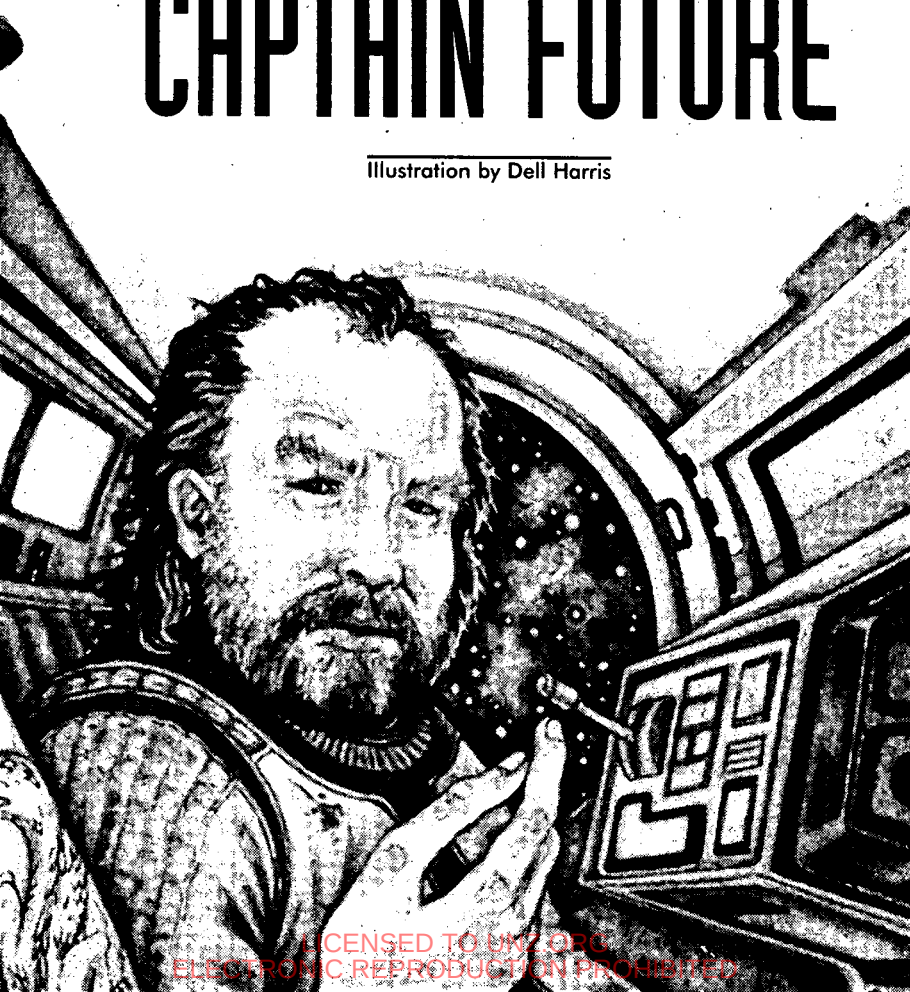
Allen Steele

THE DEATH OF CAPTAIN FUTURE

Illustration by Dell Harris



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Although mention of the title character from our riveting cover story can be found in Robert Silverberg's pertinent Reflections column, "The Audience Grows Older" (see page 4), the tale was selected for the October issue several months before the editorial came across our desks. We think Mr. Silverberg has some keen insights into the successful methods used by 1940's SF magazines to attract young readers. Still, though *Asimov's* delights in a broad audience, we are not changing our editorial direction with "The Death of Captain Future." Allen Steele's story is not quite the tale that Edmond Hamilton would have written, but it is an excellent homage to both the era and the author. While it occurs farther out in space and later in the twenty-first century, Mr. Steele's story takes place in the same future history as many of his previous *Asimov's* tales. The story is related to his book-length novella, *The Weight*, which will be published in Britain by Legend Books in January. The author's latest American publication is *The Tranquillity Alternative* (Berkley).

The name of Captain Future, the supreme foe of all evil and evildoers, was known to every inhabitant of the Solar System.

That tall, cheerful, red-haired young adventurer of ready laugh and flying fists was the implacable Nemesis of all oppressors and exploiters of the System's human and planetary races. Combining a gay audacity with an unswervable purposefulness and an unparalleled mastery of science, he had blazed a brilliant trail across the nine worlds in defense of the right.

—Edmond Hamilton; *Captain Future And The Space Emperor* (1940)

This is the true story of how Capture Future died.

We were crossing the inner belt, coasting toward our scheduled rendezvous with Ceres, when the message was received by the ship's comlink.

"Rohr . . .? Rohr, wake up, please."

The voice coming from the ceiling was tall, dark, and handsome, sampled from one of the old Hercules vids in the captain's collection. It penetrated the darkness of my quarters on the mid-deck where I lay asleep after standing an eight-hour watch on the bridge.

I turned my head to squint at the computer terminal next to my bunk. Lines of alphanumeric code scrolled down the screen, displaying the routine systems-checks and updates that, as second officer, I was supposed to be monitoring at all times, even when I was off-duty and dead to the world. No red-bordered emergency messages, though; at first glance, everything looked copasetic.

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Except the time. It was 0335 Zulu, the middle of the goddamn night.

"Rohr?" The voice was a little louder now. *"Mister Furland? Please wake up. . . ."*

I groaned and rolled over. "Okay, okay, I'm awake. What'dya want, Brain?"

The Brain. It was bad enough that the ship's AI sounded like Steve Reeves; it also had to have a stupid name like The Brain. On every vessel on which I had served, crewmembers had given their AIs human names—Rudy, Beth, Kim, George, Stan, Lisa, dubbed after friends or family members or deceased shipmates—or nicknames, either clever or overused: Boswell, Isaac, Slim, Flash, Ramrod, plus the usual Hals and Datas from the nostalgia buffs. I once held down a gig on a lunar tug where the AI was called Fughead—as in *Hey, Fughead, gimme the traffic grid for Tycho Station*—but no one but a bonehead would give their AI a silly-ass moniker like The Brain.

No one but Captain Future, that is . . . and I still hadn't decided whether or not my current boss was a bonehead, or just insane.

"The captain asked me to awaken you," The Brain said. *"He wants you on the bridge at once. He says that it's urgent."*

I checked the screen again. "I don't see anything urgent."

"Captain's orders, Mr. Furland." The ceiling fluorescents began to slowly brighten behind their cracked and dusty panes, causing me to squint and clap my hand over my eyes. *"If you don't report to the bridge in ten minutes, you'll be docked one hour time-lost and a mark will be entered on your union card."*

Threats like that usually don't faze me—everyone loses a few hours or gains a few marks during a long voyage—but I couldn't afford a bad service report now. In two more days the TBSA *Comet* would reach Ceres, where I was scheduled to join up with the *Jove Commerce*, outbound for Callisto. I had been lucky to get this far, and I didn't want my next CO to ground me just because of a bad report from my previous captain.

"Okay," I muttered. "Tell 'em I'm on my way."

I swung my legs over the side and felt around for where I had dropped my clothes on the deck. I could have used a rinse, a shave, and a nice long meditation in the head, not to mention a mug of coffee and a muffin from the galley, but it was obvious that I wasn't going to get that.

Music began to float from the walls, an orchestral overture that gradually rose in volume. I paused, my calves halfway into the trouser legs, as the strings soared upward, gathering heroic strength. German opera. Wagner. *The Flight of the Valkyries*, for God's sake. . . .

"Cut it out, Brain," I said.

The music stopped in mid-chord. *"The captain thought it would help rouse you."*

"I'm roused." I stood up and pulled my trousers the rest of the way

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on. In the dim light, I glimpsed a small motion near the corner of my compartment beside the locker; one moment it was there, then it was gone. "There's a cockroach in here," I said. "Wanna do something about it?"

"I'm sorry, Rohr. I have tried to disinfect the vessel, but so far I have been unable to locate all the nests. If you'll leave your cabin door unlocked while you're gone, I'll send a drone inside to . . ."

"Never mind." I zipped up my pants, pulled on a sweatshirt and looked around for my stikshoes. They were kicked under my bunk; I knelt down on the threadbare carpet and pulled them out. "I'll take care of it myself."

The Brain meant nothing by that comment; it was only trying to get rid of another pest which had found its way aboard the *Comet* before the freighter had departed from LaGrange Four. Cockroaches, fleas, ants, even the occasional mouse; they managed to get into any vessel that regularly rendezvoused with near-Earth spaceports, but I had never been on any ship so infested as the *Comet*. Yet I wasn't about to leave my cabin door unlocked. One of a few inviolable union rules I still enjoyed aboard this ship was the ability to seal my cabin, and I didn't want to give the captain a chance to go poking through my stuff. He was convinced that I was carrying contraband with me to Ceres Station, and even though he was right—two fifths of lunar mash whiskey, a traditional coming-aboard present for my next commanding officer—I didn't want him pouring good liquor down the sink because of Association regulations no one else bothered to observe.

I pulled on my shoes, fastened a utility belt around my waist and left the cabin, carefully locking the door behind me with my thumbprint. A short, upward-curving corridor took me past the closed doors of two other crew cabins, marked CAPTAIN and FIRST OFFICER. The captain was already on the bridge, and I assumed that Jeri was with him.

A manhole led to the central access shaft and the carousel. Before I went up to the bridge, though, I stopped by the wardroom to fill a squeezebulb with coffee from the pot. The wardroom was a disaster: a dinner tray had been left on the table, discarded food wrappers lay on the floor, and a small spider-like robot waded in the galley's sink, waging solitary battle against the crusty cookware that had been abandoned there. The captain had been here recently; I was surprised that he hadn't summoned me to clean up after him. At least there was some hot coffee left in the carafe, although judging from its odor and viscosity it was probably at least ten hours old; I toned it down with sugar and half-sour milk from the fridge before I poured it into a squeezebulb.

As always, the pictures on the wardroom walls caught my eye: framed reproductions of covers from ancient pulp magazines well over a hundred years old. The magazines themselves, crumbling and priceless, were bagged and hermetically sealed within a locker in the Captain's quarters.

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Lurid paintings of fishbowl-helmeted spacemen fighting improbable alien monsters and mad scientists that, in turn, menaced buxom young women in see-thru outfits. The adolescent fantasies of the last century—"Planets In Peril," "Quest Beyond the Stars," "Star Trail to Glory"—and above them all, printed in a bold swath across the top of each cover, a title . . .

CAPTAIN FUTURE

Man of Tomorrow

At that moment, my reverie was broken by a harsh voice coming from the ceiling:

"Furland! Where are you?"

"In the wardroom, Captain." I pinched off the lip of the squeezebulb and sealed it with a catheter, then clipped it to my belt. "Just grabbing some coffee. I'll be up there in a minute."

"You got sixty seconds to find your duty station or I'll dock your pay for your last shift! Now hustle your lazy butt up here!"

"Coming right now. . . ." I walked out of the wardroom, heading up the corridor toward the shaft. "Toad," I whispered under my breath when I was through the hatch and out of earshot from the ship's comnet. Who's calling who lazy?

Captain Future, Man of Tomorrow. God help us if that were true.

Ten minutes later a small ship shaped like an elongated teardrop rose from an underground hangar on the lunar surface. It was the Comet, *the super-swift craft of the Futuremen, known far and wide through the System as the swiftest ship in space.*

—Ibid; *Calling Captain Future* (1940)

My name's Rohr Furland. For better or worse, I'm a spacer, just like my father and his mother before him.

Call it family tradition. Grandma was one of the original beamjacks who helped build the first powersat in Earth orbit before she immigrated to the Moon, where she conceived my dad as the result of a one-night stand with some nameless moondog who was killed in a blowout only two days later. Dad grew up as an unwanted child in Descartes Station; he ran away at eighteen and stowed away aboard a Skycorp freighter to Earth, where he lived like a stray dog in Memphis before he got homesick and signed up with a Russian company looking for native-born selenians. Dad got home in time to see Grandma through her last years, fight in the Moon War on the side of the Pax Astra and, not incidentally, meet my mother, who was a geologist at Tycho Station.

I was born in the luxury of a two-room apartment beneath Tycho on the first anniversary of the Pax's independence. I'm told that my dad

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celebrated my arrival by getting drunk on cheap luna wine and balling the midwife who had delivered me. It's remarkable that my parents stayed together long enough for me to graduate from suit camp. Mom went back to Earth while Dad and I stayed on the Moon to receive the benefits of full citizenship in the Pax: Class A oxygen cards, good for air even if we were unemployed and dead broke. Which was quite often, in Dad's case.

All of which makes me a mutt, a true son of a bastard, suckled on air bottles and moonwalking before I was out of my diapers. On my sixteenth birthday, I was given my union card and told to get a job; two weeks before my eighteenth birthday, the LEO shuttle that had just hired me as a cargo handler touched down on a landing strip in Galveston, and with the aid of an exoskeleton I walked for the first time on Earth. I spent one week there, long enough for me to break my right arm by falling on a Dallas sidewalk, lose my virginity to an El Paso whore, and get one hell of a case of agoraphobia from all that wide-open Texas landscape. Fuck the cradle of humanity and the horse it rode in on; I caught the next boat back to the Moon and turned eighteen with a birthday cake that had no candles.

Twelve years later, I had handled almost every union job someone with my qualifications could hold—dock slob, cargo grunt, navigator, life support chief, even a couple of second-mate assignments—on more vessels than I could count, ranging from orbital tugs and lunar freighters to passenger shuttles and Apollo-class ore haulers. None of these gigs had ever lasted much longer than a year; in order to guarantee equal opportunity for all its members, the union shifted people from ship to ship, allowing only captains and first-mates to remain with their vessels for longer than eighteen months. It was a hell of a system; by the time you became accustomed to one ship and its captain, you were transferred to another ship and had to learn all over again. Or, worse, you went without work for several months at a time, which meant hanging around some spacer bar at Tycho Station or Descartes City, waiting for the local union rep to throw some other guy out of his present assignment and give you his job.

It was a life, but it wasn't much of a living. I was thirty years old and still possessed all my fingers and toes, but had precious little money in the bank. After fifteen years of hard work, the nearest thing I had to a permanent address was the storage locker in Tycho where I kept my few belongings. Between jobs, I lived in union hostels on the Moon or the elfives, usually occupying a bunk barely large enough to swing either a cat or a call-girl. Even the whores lived better than I did; sometimes I'd pay them just to let me sleep in a decent bed for a change, and never mind the sex.

To make matters worse, I was bored out of my wits. Except for one

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cycleship run out to Mars when I was twenty-five, I had spent my entire career—hell, my entire life—running between LEO and the Moon. It's not a bad existence, but it's not a great one either. There's no shortage of sad old farts hanging around the union halls, telling big lies to anyone who'll listen about their glory days as beamjacks or moondogs while drinking away their pensions. I was damned if I would end up like them, but I knew that if I didn't get off the Moon real soon, I would be schleping LOX tanks for the rest of my life.

Meanwhile, a new frontier was being opened in the outer system. Deep-space freighters hauled helium-3 from Jupiter to feed the fusion tokamaks on Earth, and although Queen Macedonia had placed Titan off-limits because of the Plague, the Iapetus colony was still operational. There was good money to be made from landing a gig on one of the big ships that cruised between the gas giants and the belt, and union members who found work on the Jupiter and Saturn runs had guaranteed three-year contracts. It wasn't the same thing as making another trip between Moon and LEO every few days. The risks were greater, but so was the payoff.

Competition for jobs on the outer-system ships was tight, but that didn't stop me from applying anyway. My fifteen-year service record, with few complaints from previous captains and one Mars run to my name, helped me put a leg up over most of the other applicants. I held down a job as a cargo grunt for another year while I waited, but the union eventually rotated me out and left me hanging in Sloppy Joe's Bar in Tycho. Six weeks later, just as I was considering signing up as a tractor operator on the Clavius Dome construction project, the word came: the *Jove Commerce* needed a new executive officer, and my name had been drawn from the hat.

There was only one hitch. Since the *Commerce* didn't come further in-system than Ceres, and because the union didn't guarantee passage to the belt as part of the deal, I would have to either travel aboard a clipper—out of the question, since I didn't have money—or find a temporary job on an outbound asteroid freighter.

Okay, I was willing to do that, but now there was another complication: few freighters had available gigs for selenians. Most vessels which operated in the main belt were owned by the Transient Body Shipping Association, and TBSA captains preferred to hire crewmembers from other ships owned by the co-op rather than from my union. Nor did they want to sign up some dude who would only be making a one-way trip, because they'd lose him on Ceres before the trip was half-over.

The predicament was explained to me by my union rep when I met with him in his office in Tycho. Schumacher was an old buddy; he and I had worked together aboard a LEO tugboat before the union had hired

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him as its Tycho Station representative, so he knew my face and was willing to cut me some slack.

"Look, Rohr," he said, propping his moccasins up on his desk, "here's the scoop. I've checked around for a boat that'll take you on, and I found what you were looking for. An Ares-class ore freighter, outbound for Ceres . . . in fact, she's already docked at LaGrange Four and is ready to launch as soon as her captain finds a new second."

As he spoke, Schumacher punched up a holo of the ship, and it revolved in the tank above his desk. It was a standard rock hauler: eighty-two meters in length, with a gas-core nuclear engine at one end and a drum-shaped crew module at the other, joined at the center by the long narrow spine and open cargo bays. An uprated tugboat, really; nothing about it was either unfamiliar or daunting. I took a slug off the whisky flask he had pulled out of his desk drawer. "Great. What's her name?"

He hesitated. "The TBSA *Comet,*" he said reluctantly. "Her captain is Bo McKinnon."

I shrugged and passed the flask back to him. "So what's the catch?"

Schumacher blinked. Instead of taking a hit off the whisky, he recapped the flask and shoved it back in the drawer. "Let me repeat that," he said, "The *Comet*. Bo McKinnon." He peered at me as if I had come down with Titan Plague. "You're telling me you've never heard of him?"

I didn't keep up with the TBSA freighters or their captains; they returned to the Moon only once every few months to drop off their cargo and change crews, so few selenians happened to see them unless they were getting drunk in some bar. "Not a clue," I said.

Schumacher closed his eyes. "Terrific," he murmured. "The one guy who's never heard of Captain Future and it's gotta be you."

"Captain who?"

He looked back at me. "Look, just forget the whole thing, okay? Pretend I never mentioned it. There's another rock hauler heading out to Ceres in about six or seven weeks. I'll talk to the Association, try to get you a gig on that one instead. . . ."

I shook my head. "I can't wait another six or seven weeks. If I'm not on Ceres in three months, I'll lose the *Jove Commerce* job. What's wrong with this gig?"

Schumacher sighed as he reached back into the drawer for the flask. "What's wrong," he said, "is the nut who's in command. McKinnon is the worst captain in the Association. No one who's shipped out with him has ever stayed aboard, except maybe the google he's got for a first mate."

I had to bite my tongue when he said that. We were pals, but racism isn't an endearing trait. Sure, Superiors can be weird—their eyes, for starters, which was why some people called them by that name—but if you also use words like nigger, slant, kike or spic to describe people, then you're no friend of mine.

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On the other hand, when you're hungry for work, you'll put up with just about anything.

Schumacher read the expression on my face. "It's not just that," he said hastily. "I understand the first officer is okay." *For a google, that is,* although he didn't say it aloud. "It's McKinnon himself. People have jumped ship, faked illness, torn up their union cards . . . anything to get off the *Comet*."

"That bad?"

"That bad." He took a long hit off the flask, gasped, and passed it back across the desk to me. "Oh, the pay's okay . . . minimum wage, but by Association standards that's better than union scale . . . and the *Comet* passes all the safety requirements, or at least so at inspection time. But McKinnon's running a tank short of a full load, if y'know what I mean."

I didn't drink from the flask. "Naw, man, I don't know what you mean. What's with this . . . what did you call him?"

"Captain Future. That's what he calls himself, Christ knows why." He grinned. "Not only that, but he also calls his AI 'The Brain' . . ."

I laughed out loud. "The Brain? Like, what? He's got a brain floating in a jar? I don't get it. . . ."

"I dunno. It's a fetish of some kind." He shook his head. "Anyway, everyone who's worked for him says that he thinks he's some kinda space hero, and he expects everyone to go along with the idea. And he's supposed to be real tough on people . . . you might think he was a perfectionist, if he wasn't such a slob himself."

I had worked for both kinds before, along with a few weirdos. They didn't bother me, so long as the money was right and they minded their own business. "Ever met him?"

Schumacher held out his hand; I passed the flask back to him and he took another swig. Must be the life, sitting on your ass all day, getting drunk and deciding people's futures. I envied him so much, I hoped someone would kindly cut my throat if I was ever in his position.

"Nope," he said. "Not once. He spends all his time on the *Comet*, even when he's back here. Hardly ever leaves the ship, from what I've been told . . . and that's another thing. Guys who've worked for him say that he expects his crew to do everything but wipe his butt after he visits the head. Nobody gets a break on his ship, except maybe his first officer."

"What about him?"

"Her. Nice girl, name of . . ." He thought hard for a moment, then snapped his fingers. "Jeri. Jeri Lee-Bose, that's it." He smiled. "I met her once, not long before she went to work on the *Comet*. She's sweet, for a google."

He winked and dropped his voice a bit. "I hear she's got a thing for us apes," he murmured. "In fact, I've been told she's bunking with her captain. If half of what I've heard about McKinnon is true, that must make him twice as sick as I've heard."

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I didn't reply. Schumacher dropped his feet and leaned across the desk, lacing his fingers together as he looked straight at me. "Look, Rohr," he said, as deadly serious as if he was discussing my wanting to marry his sister, "I know you're working under a time limit and how much the *Jove Commerce* job means to you. But I gotta tell you, the only reason why Captain Future would even consider taking aboard a short-timer is because nobody else will work for him. He's just as desperate as you are, but I don't give a shit about him. If you wanna turn it down, I won't add it to your card and I'll save your place in line. It'll just be between you and me. Okay?"

"And if I turn it down?"

He waved his hand back and forth. "Like I said, I can try to find you another gig. The *Nickel Queen*'s due home in another six weeks or so. I've got some pull with her captain, so maybe I can get you a job there . . . but honest to Jesus, I can't promise anything. The *Queen*'s a good ship and everyone I know wants to work for her, just as much as nobody wants to get within a klick of the *Comet*."

"So what do you suggest I do?"

Schumacher just smiled and said nothing. As my union rep, he was legally forbidden against making any decisions for me; as a pal, he had done his best to warn me about the risks. From both points of view, though, he knew I didn't have any real choice. I could spend three months aboard a ship run by a borderline psycho, or the rest of my life jacking off on the Moon.

I thought about it for a few moments, then I asked for the contract.

The three Futuremen who were Curt Newton's faithful, lifelong comrades made a striking contrast to their tall, red-haired young leader.

—Ibid; *The Comet Kings* (1942)

One-sixth gravity disappeared as I crawled through the carousel hatch and entered the bridge.

The *Comet*'s command center was located in the non-rotating forward deck of the crew module. The bridge was the largest single compartment in the ship, but even in freefall it was cramped: chairs, consoles, screens, emergency suit lockers, the central navigation table with its holo tank and, at the center of the low ceiling, the hemispherical bulge of the observation blister.

The ceiling lamps were turned down low when I came in—the Brain was mimicking Earth-time night—but I could see Jeri seated at her duty station on the far end of the circular deck. She looked around when she heard the hatch open.

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"Morning," she said, smiling at me. "Hey, is that coffee?"

"Something like it," I muttered. She gazed enviously at the squeeze-bulb in my hand. "Sorry I didn't bring you any," I added, "but the Captain . . ."

"Right. I heard Bo yell at you." She feigned a pout which didn't last very long. "That's okay. I can get some later after we make the burn."

Jeri Lee-Bose: six-foot-two, which is short for a Superior, with the oversized dark blue eyes that give bioengineered spacers their unsavory nickname. Thin and flat-chested to the point of emaciation, the fingers of her ambidextrous hands were long and slender, her thumbs almost extending to the tips of her index fingers. Her ash-blond hair was shaved nearly to the skull, except for the long braid that extended from the nape of her neck nearly down to the base of her narrow spine, where her double-jointed legs began.

The pale skin of her face was marked with finely etched tattoos around her eyes, nose, and mouth, forming the wings of a monarch butterfly. She had been given these when she had turned five, and since Superiors customarily add another tattoo on their birthdays and Jeri Lee was twenty-five, pictograms covered most of her arms and her shoulders, constellations and dragons which weaved their way under and around the tank-top she wore. I had no idea of what else lay beneath her clothes, but I imagined that she was well on her way to becoming a living painting.

Jeri was strange, even for a Superior. For one thing, her kind usually segregate themselves from Primaries, as they politely call us baseline humans (or apes, when we're not around). They tend to remain within their family-based clans, operating independent satrapies that deal with the TBSA and the major space companies only out of economic necessity, so it's rare to find a lone Superior working on a vessel owned by a Primary.

For another thing, although I've been around Superiors most of my life and they don't give me the creeps like they do most groundhogs and even many spacers, I've never appreciated the aloof condescension the majority of them display around unenhanced humans. Give one of them a few minutes, and they'll bend your ear about the Superior philosophy of extropic evolution and all that jive. Yet Jeri was the refreshing, and even oddball, exception to the rule. She had a sweet disposition, and from the moment I had come aboard the *Comet,* she had accepted me both as an equal and as a new-found friend. No stuffiness, no harangues about celibacy or the unspirituality of eating meat or using profanity; she was a fellow crewmate, and that was that.

No. That wasn't quite all there was to it.

When one got past the fact that she was a scarecrow with feet that functioned as a second pair of hands and eyes the size of fuel valves, she

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was sensual as hell. She was a pretty woman, and I had become infatuated with her. Schumacher would have twitched at the thought of sleeping with a google, but in three weeks since The Brain had revived us from the zombie tanks, there had been more than a few times when my desire to see the rest of her body exceeded simple curiosity about her tattoos.

Yet I knew very little about her. As much as I loved looking at her, that was surpassed by my admiration for her innate talent as a spacer. In terms of professional skill, Jeri Lee-Bose was one of the best First Officers I had ever met. Any Royal Navy, TBSA, or free-trader captain would have killed to sign her aboard.

So what the hell was she doing aboard a scow like the *Comet*, serving under a bozo like Bo McKinnon?

I tucked in my knees and did a half-gainer that landed the soles of my stikshoes against the carpet. Feet now firmly planted on the floor, I walked across the circular compartment to the nav table, sucking on the squeezebulb in my left hand. "Where's the captain?" I asked.

"Topside, taking a sextant reading." She nodded toward the observation blister above us. "He'll be down in a minute."

Typical. Part of the reason why Superiors have enhanced eyes is for optical work like sextant sightings. This should be Jeri's job, but McKinnon seemed to regard the blister as his personal throne. I sighed as I settled down in my chair and buckled in. "Should have known," I muttered. "Wakes you up in the middle of the goddamn night, then disappears when you want a straight answer."

Her mouth pursed into sympathetic frown. "Bo will tell you more when he comes down," she said, then she swiveled around in her chair as she returned her attention to her board.

Jeri was the only person aboard who was permitted to call Captain Future by his real name. I didn't have that privilege, and The Brain hadn't been programmed to do otherwise. The fondness I had developed for Jeri over the last three weeks was tempered by the fact that, in almost any disagreement, she usually sided with the captain.

Obviously, there was something else she knew but wasn't telling me, preferring to defer the issue to McKinnon. I had become used to such behavior over the last few months, but it was still irritating. Most first officers act as intermediaries between captain and crew, and in that sense Jeri performed well, yet at times like this I felt as if I had more in common with The Brain than with her.

So be it. I swiveled my chair to face the nav table. "Hey, Brain," I called out. "Gimme a holo of our current position and trajectory, please."

The space within the holo tank coruscated briefly, then an arch-shaped slice of the main belt appeared above the table. Tiny spots of orange light depicting major asteroids slowly moved along blue sidereal tracks, each

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designated by their catalog numbers. The *Comet* was pinpointed by a small silver replica of the vessel, leading the end of a broken red line which bisected the asteroid orbits.

The *Comet* was near the edge of the third Kirkwood gap, one of the "empty spaces" in the belt where Martian and Jovian gravitational forces caused the number of identified asteroids to diminish per fraction of an astronomical unit. We were now in the 1/3 gap, about two and a half A.U.'s from the Sun. In another couple of days we would enter the main belt and be closing in on Ceres. Once we arrived, the *Comet* would unload the cargo it had carried from the Moon and, in return, take on the raw ore TBSA prospectors had mined from the belt and shipped to Ceres Station. It was also there that I was scheduled to depart the *Comet* and await the arrival of the *Jove Commerce*.

At least, that was the itinerary. Now, as I studied the holo, I noticed a not-so-subtle change. The red line depicting the freighter's trajectory had been altered since the end of my last watch about four hours earlier.

It no longer intercepted Ceres. In fact, it didn't even come close to the asteroid's orbit.

The *Comet* had changed course while I slept.

Without saying anything to Jeri, I unbuckled my harness and pushed over to the table, where I silently stared at the holo for a couple of minutes, using the keypad to manually focus and enlarge the image. Our new bearing took us almost a quarter of a million kilometers from Ceres, on just the other side of the 1/3 Kirkwood gap.

"Brain," I said, "what's our destination?"

"The asteroid 2046-Barr," it replied. It displayed a new orange spot in the tank, directly in front of the *Comet*'s red line.

The last of my drowsiness dissipated into a pulse of white-hot rage. I could feel Jeri's eyes on my back.

"Rohr . . ." she began.

I didn't care. I stabbed the intercom button on the table. "McKinnon!" I bellowed. "Get down here!"

Long silence. I knew he could hear me.

"Goddammit, get down here! Now!"

Motors whined in the ceiling above me, then the hatch below the observation blister irised open and a wingback chair began to descend into the bridge, carrying the commanding officer of the TBSA *Comet*. It wasn't until the chair reached the deck that the figure seated in it spoke.

"You can call me . . . Captain Future."

In the ancient pulp magazines he so adored, Captain Future was six-and-a-half feet in height, ruggedly handsome, bronze-skinned and red-haired. None of this applied to Bo McKinnon. Squat and obese, he filled the chair like a half-ton of lard. Black curly hair, turning grey at the temples and filthy with dandruff, receded from his forehead and fell

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around his shoulders, while an oily, unkempt beard dripped down the sides of his fat cheeks, themselves the color of mildewed wax. There were old food stains on the front of his worn-out sweatshirt and dark marks in the crotch of his trousers where he had failed to properly shake himself after the last time he had visited the head. And he smelled like a fart.

If my description seems uncharitable, let there be no mistake: Bo McKinnon was a butt-ugly, foul-looking son of a whore, and I have met plenty of slobs like him to judge by comparison. He had little respect for personal hygiene and fewer social graces, he had no business being anyone's role model, and I was no mood for his melodramatic bullshit just now.

"You changed course." I pointed at the holo tank behind me, my voice quavering in anger. "We're supposed to come out of the Kirkwood in another few hours, and while I was asleep you changed course."

McKinnon calmly stared back at me. "Yes, Mister Furland, that I did. I changed the *Comet*'s trajectory while you were in your quarters."

"We're no longer heading for Ceres . . . Christ, we're going to come nowhere *near* Ceres!"

He made no move to rise from his throne. "That's correct," he said, slowly nodding his head. "I ordered The Brain to alter our course so that we'd intercept 2046-Barr. We fired maneuvering thrusters at 0130 shiptime, and in two hours we'll execute another course correction. That should put us within range of the asteroid in about . . ."

"Eight hours, Captain," Jeri said.

"Thank you, Mister Bose," he said, otherwise barely acknowledging her. "Eight hours. At this time the *Comet* will be secured for emergency action."

He folded his hands across his vast stomach and gazed back at me querulously. "Any further questions, Mister Furland?"

Further questions?

My mouth hung agape for a few moments. I was unable to speak, unable to protest, unable to do anything except wonder at the unmitigated gall of this mutant amalgamation of human and frog genes.

"Just one," I finally managed to say. "How do you expect me to make my rendezvous with the *Jove Commerce* if we detour to . . ."

"2046-Barr," Jeri said softly.

McKinnon didn't so much as blink. "We won't," he said. "In fact, I've already sent a message to Ceres Station, stating that the *Comet* will be delayed and that our new ETA is indefinite. With any luck, we'll reach Ceres in about forty-eight hours. You should be able to . . ."

"No, I won't." I grasped the armrest of his chair with both hands and leaned forward until my face was only a few inches from his. "The *Jove* is due to leave Ceres in forty-*two* hours . . . and that's at the latest, if it's

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going to meet its launch window for Callisto. They'll go, with or without me, and if they go without me, I'm stuck on Ceres."

No. That wasn't entirely true. Ceres Station wasn't like the Moon; it was too small an outpost to allow a shipwrecked spacer to simply hang around until the next outer-system vessel passed through. The TBSA rep on Ceres would demand that I find a new gig, even if it entailed signing aboard a prospector as grunt labor. This was little better than indentured servitude, since my union card didn't mean shit out here in terms of room, board, and guaranteed oxygen supplies; my paychecks would be swallowed up by all the above. Even then, there was no guarantee that I'd swing another job aboard the next Jupiter or Saturn tanker; I was lucky enough to get the *Jove Commerce* job.

That, or I could tuck tail and go back the way I came—and that meant remaining aboard the *Comet* for its return flight to the Moon.

In the latter case, I'd sooner try to walk home.

Try to understand. For the past three weeks, beginning with the moment I had crawled out of the zombie tank, I had been forced to endure almost every indignity possible while serving under Bo McKinnon. His first order, in fact, had been in the hibernation deck, when he had told me to take the catheter off his prick and hold a bag for him to pee in.

That had been only the beginning. Standing double-watches on the bridge because he was too lazy to get out of bed. Repairing decrepit equipment that should have been replaced years ago, only to have it break down again within a few more days after he had abused it past its tolerance levels. Being issued spurious orders on a whim, only to have those same orders countermanded before the task was half-complete because McKinnon had more scut-work he wanted me to do—then being berated because the first assignment had been left unfinished. Meals skipped because the captain decided that now was the time for me go EVA and inspect the davits in the payload bay. Rest periods interrupted because he wanted a snack fetched from the galley and was too "busy" to get it himself. . . .

But most of all, the sibilant, high-pitched whine of his voice, like that of a spoiled brat who had been given too many toys by an overindulgent parent. Which was, indeed, exactly what he was.

Bo McKinnon hadn't earned his TBSA commission. It had been purchased for him by his stepfather, a wealthy lunar businessman who was one of the Association's principal stockholders. The *Comet* had been an obsolete ore freighter on the verge of being condemned and scuttled when the old man had bought it for the kid as a means of getting his unwanted stepson out of his hair. Before that, McKinnon had been a customs inspector at Descartes, a minor bureaucrat with delusions of grandeur fostered by the cheap space operas in his collection of moldering twentieth century magazines, for which he apparently spent every spare credit

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he had in the bank. No doubt his stepfather had been as sick of McKinnon as I was. At least this way the pompous geek spent most of his time out in the belt, hauling rock and bellowing orders at whoever was unlucky enough to have been talked into signing aboard the *Comet*.

This much I had learned after I had been aboard for three weeks. By the time I had sent a message to Schumacher, demanding to know what else he hadn't told me about Bo McKinnon, I was almost ready to steal the *Comet*'s skiff and attempt flying it to Mars. When Schumacher sent me his reply, he gave a lame apology for not telling me everything about McKinnon's background; after all, it was his job to muster crewmembers for deep-space craft, and he couldn't play favorites, so sorry, et cetera. . . .

By then I had figured out the rest. Bo McKinnon was a rich kid playing at being a spacecraft commander. He wanted the role, but he didn't want to pay the dues, the hard-won experience that any true commander has to accomplish. Instead, he managed to shanghai washed-up cases like me to do his dirty work for him. No telling what arrangement he had worked out with Jeri; for my part, I was the latest in a long line of flunkies.

I didn't hijack the skiff, if only because doing so would have ruined my career and Mars colonists are notoriously unkind to uninvited guests. Besides, I figured that this was a temporary thing: three weeks of Captain Future, and I'd have a story to tell my shipmates aboard the *Jove Commerce* as we sipped whisky around the wardroom table. You think this captain's a hardass? Hey, let me tell you about my last one. . . .

Now, as much as I still wanted to get the hell off the *Comet,* I did not wish to be marooned on Ceres, where I would be at the tender mercies of the station chief.

Time to try a different tack with Captain Future.

I released the armrests and backed off, taking a deep breath as I forced myself to calm down. "Look, Captain," I said, "what's so important about this asteroid? I mean, if you've located a possible lode, you can always stake a claim with the Association and come back for it later. What's the rush?"

McKinnon raised an imperious eyebrow. "Mr. Furland, I am not a prospector," he huffed. "If I were, I wouldn't be commanding the *Comet,* would I?"

No, I silently responded, you wouldn't. No self-respecting rockhounds would have you aboard their ship. "Then what's so important?"

Without a word, McKinnon unbuckled his seat harness and pushed out his chair. Microgravity is the great equalizer for overweight men; he floated across the narrow compartment with the grace of a lunar trapeze artist, somersaulting in mid-air and catching a ceiling rung above the navigation table, where he swung upside-down and typed a command into the keyboard.

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The holo expanded until 2046-Barr filled the tank. Now I could see that it was a potato-shaped rock, about three klicks in length and seven hundred meters in diameter. An octopus-like machine clung to one end of the asteroid, with a narrow, elongated pistol thrust out into space.

I recognized it immediately. A General Astronautics Class-B Mass Driver, the type used by the Association to push large carbonaceous-chrondite asteroids into the inner belt. In effect, a mobile mining rig. Long bores sunk into the asteroid extracted raw material from its core, which in turn were fed into the machine's barrel-shaped refinery, where heavy metals and volatiles were separated from the ancient stone. The remaining till was then shot through an electromagnetic railgun as reaction mass that propelled both asteroid and mass driver in whatever direction was desired.

By the time the asteroid reached lunar orbit, the rig would have refined enough nickel, copper, titanium, carbon, and hydrogen to make the effort worthwhile. The hollowed out remains of the asteroid could then be sold to one of the companies, who would then begin the process of transforming it into another LaGrange colony.

"That's the TBSA *Fool's Gold,*" McKinnon said, pointing at the computer-generated image. "It's supposed to reach lunar orbit in four months. Twelve persons are aboard, including its captain, first officer, executive officer, physician, two metallurgists, three engineers . . ."

"Yeah, okay. Twelve guys who are going to get rich when the shares are divvied up." I couldn't keep the envy out of my voice. Only one or two main-belt asteroids made their way in-system every few years, mainly because prospectors didn't find enough such rocks to make them worth the time, money, and attention. The smaller ones were usually broken up by nukes, and anything much larger was claimed and mined by prospectors. On the other hand, if just the right asteroid was located and claimed, the bonanza was enough to make its finders wealthy enough to retire. "So what?"

McKinnon stared at me for a moment, then he cartwheeled until he was no longer upside-down and dug into a pocket. He handed me a wadded-up slip of printout. "Read," he said.

I read:

MESS. 1473 0118 GMT 7/26/73 CODE A1/0947
TRANSMISSION FROM CERES STATION TO ALL SPACECRAFT PRIORITY REPEATER
MESSAGE BEGINS
MAYDAY RECEIVED 1240 GMT 7/25/46 FROM TBSA MASS DRIVER "FOOL'S GOLD" BREAK VESSEL EXPERIENCING UNKNOWN—REPEAT UNKNOWN—PROBLEMS BREAK CASUALTIES AND POSSIBLE FATALITIES REPORTED DUE TO

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UNDETERMINED CAUSES BREAK SHIP STATUS UNKNOWN BREAK NO FURTHER COMMUNICATION FOLLOWING MAYDAY BREAK VESSEL FAILS TO RESPOND TO QUERIES BREAK REQUEST URGENT ASSISTANCE FROM NEAREST VESSEL OF ANY REGISTRY BREAK PLEASE RESPOND ASAP MESSAGE ENDS
(TRANSMISSION REPEATS)
0119 GMT 7/26/73 CODE A1/0947

I turned to Jeri. "Are we the nearest vessel?"

She gravely nodded her head. "I checked. The only other ship within range is a prospector near Gaspara, and it's thirty-four hours from Barr. Everything else is closer to Ceres than we are."

Damn.

According to common law, the closest vessel to a spacecraft transmitting a Mayday was obligated to respond, regardless of any other mission or prior obligation in all but the most extreme emergency . . . and my job aboard the *Jove Commerce* didn't qualify as such, as much as I might have liked to think otherwise.

McKinnon held out his hand. I handed the paper back to him. "I guess you've already informed Ceres that we're on our way."

The captain silently reached to another panel and pushed a set of buttons. A flatscreen lit, displaying a playback of the transmission he had sent to Ceres Station. A simulacrum of the fictional Curt Newton appeared on the screen.

"This is Captain Future, calling from the TBSA Comet, *registry Mexico Alpha Foxtrot one-six-seven-five."* The voice belonged to McKinnon even if the handsome face did not. The Brain had lip-synched them together, and the effect was sadly absurd. *I've received your transmission, and I'm on our way to investigate the situation aboard the* Fool's Gold. *The Futuremen and I will keep you informed. Captain Future, over and out."*

I groaned as I watched this. The idiot couldn't keep his fantasy life out of anything, even a distress signal. Captain Future and the—yech! —Futuremen to the rescue.

"You have something to say, Mister Furland?"

McKinnon's hairy chin was thrust out at me with what he probably thought was obstinate resolve, but which actually resembled the petulance of an insecure child daring someone to step into his corner of the sandbox. Not for the first time, I realized that his only way of dealing with people was to boss them around with what little authority he could muster—and since this was his ship, no one could either object or walk out on him. Least of all me.

"None, Captain." I pushed off from the nav table and floated back to my duty station. Like it or not, we were committed; he had both law and

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his commission on his side, and I wasn't about to commit mutiny because I had refused my commander's orders to respond to a distress signal.

"Very good." McKinnon shoved himself in the direction of the carousel hatch. "The sextant confirms we're on course for Barr. I'll be in my cabin if you need me."

He stopped, then looked over his shoulder. "You'll need to arm the weapons pod. There may be . . . trouble."

Then he was gone, undoubtedly to claim the sleep I had lost.

"Trouble, my ass," I murmured under my breath.

I glanced over at Jeri. If I expected a sly wink or an understanding smile, I received nothing of the kind. Her face was stoical behind the butterfly mask she wore; she touched her jaw, speaking into the microphone implanted beneath her skin at childhood. "TBSA *Fool's Gold*, this is TBSA *Comet*, Mexico Alpha Foxtrot one-six-seven-five. Do you copy? Over."

I was trapped aboard a ship commanded by a lunatic.

Or so I thought. The real insanity was yet to come.

Space pirates were no new thing, to the System. There were always some corsairs infesting the outlaw asteroids or the wilder moons of the outer planets.

—Ibid; *Outlaw World* (1945)

One good thing could be said about standing a second consecutive watch on the bridge: I finally learned a little more about Jeri Lee-Bose.

Does it seem surprising that I could have spent three weeks of active duty aboard a spacecraft without hearing a shipmate's entire life story? If so, understand that there's a certain code of conduct among spacers; since many of us have unsavory pasts that we'd rather not discuss, it's not considered proper etiquette to bug someone about private matters unless they themselves bring it up first. Of course, some shipmates will bore you to death, blabbing about everything they've ever said or done until you want to push them into the nearest airlock. On the other hand I've known several people for many years without ever learning where they were born or who their parents were.

Jeri fell into the latter category. After we were revived from biostasis, I had learned many little things about her, but not very many big things. It wasn't as if she was consciously hiding her past; it was simply that the subject had never really come up, during the few times that we had been alone together without Captain Future's presence looming over us. Indeed, she might have completed the voyage as a near-stranger, had I not made an offhand comment.

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"I bet the selfish son-of-a-bitch has never thought of anyone else in his life," I said.

I had just returned from the galley, where I had fetched two fresh squeezebulbs of coffee for us. I was still fuming from the argument I had lost, and since McKinnon wasn't in earshot I gave Jeri an earful.

She passively sipped her coffee as I pissed and moaned about my misfortunes, listening patiently as I paced back and forth in my stikshoes, ranting about the commanding officer's dubious mental balance, his unflattering physiognomy, his questionable taste in literature, his body odor and anything else that came to mind, and when I paused for breath she finally put in her quarter-credit.

"He saved my life," she said.

That caught me literally off-balance. My shoes came unstuck from the carpet, and I had to grab hold of a ceiling handrail.

"Say what?" I asked.

Not looking up at me, Jeri Lee absently played with the squeezebulb in her left hand, her right foot holding open the pages of her personal logbook. "You said that he's never thought of anyone else in his life," she replied. "Whatever else you might say about him, you're wrong there, because he saved my life."

I shifted hands so I could sip my coffee. "Anything you want to talk about?"

She shrugged. "Nothing that probably hasn't occurred to you already. I mean, you've probably wondered why a google is serving as first officer aboard this ship, haven't you?" When my mouth gaped open, she smiled a little. "Don't look so surprised. We're not telepathic, rumors to the contrary . . . it's just that I've heard the same thing over the last several years we've been together."

Jeri gazed pensively through the forward windows. Although we were out of the Kirkwood gap, no asteroids could be seen. The belt is much less dense than many people think, so all we saw was limitless starscape, with Mars a distant ruddy orb off to the port side.

"You know how Superiors mate, don't you?" she asked at last, still not looking at me.

I felt my face grow warm. Actually, I didn't know, although I had frequently fantasized about Jeri helping me find out. Then I realized that she was speaking literally. "Prearranged marriages, right?"

She nodded. "All very carefully planned, in order to avoid inbreeding while expanding the gene pool as far as possible. It allows for some selection, of course . . . no one tells us exactly *whom* we should marry, just as long as it's outside of our own clans and it's not to Primaries."

She paused to finish her coffee, then she crumpled the squeezebulb and batted it aside with her right foot. It floated in midair, finding its own miniature orbit within the compartment. "Well, sometimes it doesn't

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work out that way. When I was twenty, I fell in love with a boy at Descartes Station . . . a Primary, as luck would have it. At least I thought I was in love. . . ."

She grimaced, brushing her long braid away from her delicate shoulders. "In hindsight, I guess we were just good in bed. In the long run it didn't matter, because as soon as he discovered that he had knocked me up, he got the union to ship him off to Mars. They were only too glad to do so, in order to avoid . . ."

"A messy situation. I see." I took a deep breath. "Leaving you stuck with his child."

She shook her head. "No. No child. I tried to keep it, but the miscarriage . . . anyway, the less said about that, the better."

"I'm sorry." What else could I have said? She should have known better, since there had never been a successful crossbreeding between Superiors and Primaries? She had been young and stupid; both are forgivable sins, especially when they usually occur in tandem.

Jeri heaved a sigh. "It didn't matter. By then, my family had disowned me, mainly because I had violated the partnership that already been made for me with another clan. Both clans were scandalized, and as a result neither one wanted me." She looked askance at me. "Bigotry works both ways, you know. You call us googles, we call you apes, and I had slept with an ape. An insult against the extropic ideal."

She closed the logbook, tossed it from her left foot to her right hand, and tucked it into a web beneath the console. "So I was grounded at Descartes. A small pension, just enough to pay the rent, but nothing really to live for. I suppose they expected me to become a prostitute . . . which I did, for a short time . . . or commit ritual suicide and save everyone the sweat."

"That's cold." But not unheard of. There were a few grounded Superiors to be found in the inner system, poor sad cases working at menial tasks in LaGranges or on the Moon. I remembered an alcoholic google who hung out at Sloppy Joe's; he had eagle wings tattooed across his back, and he cadged drinks off tourists in return for performing cartwheels across the bar. An eagle with clipped tailfeathers. Every so often, one would hear of a Superior who checked out by walking into an airlock and pushing the void button. No one knew why, but now I had an answer. It was the Superior way.

"That's extropy for you." She laughed bitterly, then was quiet for a moment. "I was considering taking the long walk," she said at last, "but Bo found me first, when I . . . well, propositioned him. He bought me a couple of drinks and listened to my story, and when I was done crying he told me he needed a new first officer. No one else would work for him, so he offered me the job, for as long as I cared to keep it."

"And you've kept it."

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"And I've kept it," she finished. "For the record, Mr. Furland, he has always treated me with the greatest of respect, despite what anyone else might have told you. I've never slept with him, nor has he ever demanded that I do so . . ."

"I didn't . . . !"

"No, of course you haven't, but you've probably wondered, haven't you?" When I turned red, she laughed again. "Everyone who has worked the *Comet* has, and sometimes they like to tell stories about the google and the fat slob, fucking in his cabin between shifts."

She smiled, slowly shaking her head. "It isn't so . . . but, to tell the truth, if he ever asked, I'd do so without a second thought. I owe him that little."

I didn't say anything for a couple of minutes. It isn't often when a shipmate unburdens his or her soul, and Jeri had given me much to consider. Not the least of which was the slow realization that, now more than before, I was becoming quite fond of her.

Before he had gone below, McKinnon had told me to activate the external missile pod, so I pushed myself over to his station and used that minor task to cover for my embarrassment.

Strapping on EMP to an Ares-class freighter was another example of McKinnon's overheated imagination. When I had once asked why, he'd told me that he'd purchased it as war surplus from the Pax Astra Royal Navy back in '71, after the hijacking of the TBSA *Olympia*. No one had ever discovered who had taken the *Olympia*—indeed, the hijack wasn't discovered until five months later, when the uncrewed solar-sail vessel arrived at Ceres Station with its cargo holds empty—but it was widely believed to be the work of indie prospectors desperate for food and various supplies.

I had to cover my smile when McKinnon told me that he was worried about "pirates" trying to waylay the *Comet*. Having four 10k nukes tucked behind the *Comet*'s cargo section was like arming a gig with heatseekers. Not that McKinnon wouldn't have loved it if someone *did* try to steal his ship—Captain Future meets the Asteroid Pirates and all that—but I was worried that he might open fire on some off-course prospector ship that was unlucky enough to cross his path.

Another thought occurred to me. "When he picked you . . . um, when you signed on as First Officer . . . were you aware that he doesn't have a firm grip on reality?"

Jeri didn't answer immediately. I was about to repeat myself when I felt a gentle nudge against my arm. Looking down, I saw her left foot slide past me, its thumb-sized toes toggling the **MISSILE STANDBY** switch I had neglected to throw.

"Sure," she said. "In fact, he used to call me Joan . . . as in Joan Randall, Curt Newton's girlfriend . . . until I got him to cut it out."

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"Really?"

"Um-hmm." She rested her right leg against the back of my chair. "Consider yourself lucky he doesn't call you Otho or Grag. He used to do that to other crewmen until I told him that no one got the joke." She grinned. "You ought to try reading some of those stories sometime. He's loaded them into The Brain's library annex. Not great literature, to be sure . . . in fact, they're rather silly . . . but for early twentieth century science fiction, they're . . ."

"Science what?"

"Science fiction. What they used to call fantasy back . . . well, never mind." She pulled her leg back and folded it beneath her bottom as she gazed again out the window. "Look, I know Bo can be weird most of the time, but you have to realize that he's a romantic stuck in an age where most people don't even know what the word means any more. He wants derring-do, swashbuckling, great adventure . . . he wants to be a hero."

"Uh-huh. Bo McKinnon, space hero." I tried to transpose him on the magazine covers he had framed in the galley: wielding a ray gun in each hand, defending Jeri from ravaging monsters. It didn't work, except to make me stifle a chuckle.

"That isn't too much to ask for, is it?" There was sadness in her eyes when she glanced my way. Before I could get the grin off my face, she returned her gaze to the windows. "Perhaps so. This isn't an age of heroes. We move rock back and forth across the system, put money in the bank, and congratulate ourselves for our ingenuity. A hundred years ago, what we're doing now was the stuff of dreams, and the people who did it were larger than life. That's what he finds so attractive in those stories. But now . . ."

She let out her breath. "Who can blame Bo for wanting something he can't have? He's stuck on a second-hand freighter with an ex-whore for a first officer and a second officer who openly despises him, and he's the butt of every joke from Earth to Iapetus. No wonder he drops everything to answer a Mayday. This may be the only chance he gets."

I was about to retort that my only chance to get a job on a decent ship was slipping through my fingers when her console double-beeped. A moment later, The Brain's voice came through the ceiling speaker.

"Pardon me, but we're scheduled for course correction maneuvers. Do you wish for me to execute?"

Jeri swiveled her chair around. "That's okay, Brain. We'll handle it by manual control. Give me the coordinates."

The AI responded by displaying a three-dimensional grid on her flat-screens. "Want me to do anything?" I asked, although it was obvious that she had matters well in hand.

"I've got everything covered," she said, her long fingers typing in the

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coordinates. "Get some sleep, if you want." She cast a quick grin over her shoulder. "Don't worry. I won't tell Bo you dozed off in his chair."

End of conversation. Besides, she had a good idea. I cranked back the chair, buckled the seat belt and tucked my hands in my pockets so they wouldn't drift around in freefall. It might be awhile before I got another chance; once we reached 2046-Barr, Captain Future would be back on deck, bellowing orders and otherwise making my life painful.

She had told me a lot about Bo McKinnon, but nothing I had heard gave me much affection for the man. So far as I was concerned, he was still the biggest dork I had ever met . . . and if there was anyone aboard the TBSA *Comet* who deserved my sympathy, it was Jeri Lee-Bose, who was meant for better things than this.

As I shut my eyes, it occurred to me that the captain's chair fitted me a lot better than it did McKinnon. One day, perhaps I'd have enough money in the bank to buy him out. It would be interesting to see if he took orders as well as he gave them.

It was a warm and comforting thought, and I snuggled against it like a pillow as I fell asleep.

"Look, Arraj—it is a meteor!" cried the younger Martian excitedly. "And there's a ship guiding it!"

The two stared for a moment at the incredible spectacle. The expanding black spot was clearly a giant meteor, rushing now at tremendous speed toward Mars. And close beside the booming meteor rushed a dark spaceship, playing rays upon the great mass. The ship was propelling the meteor toward Mars.

—Ibid; *Captain Future's Challenge* (1940)

Several hours later, the *Comet* rendezvoused with 2046-Barr.

The asteroid looked much the same as the holo tank had depicted it—an enormous rock the color of charcoal—but the *Fool's Gold* itself was the largest spacecraft I had ever seen short of a LaGrange colony. It dwarfed the *Comet* like a yacht parked alongside an ocean liner, a humongous machine attached to one end of the asteroid's mass.

A humongous machine, and apparently lifeless. We approached the mass-driver with great caution, being careful to avoid its stern lest we get nailed by the stream of debris being constantly ejected by its railgun. That was the only apparent sign of activity; although light gleamed from the portals of the rotating command sphere, we could detect no motion within the windows, and the radio remained as silent as it had been for the last eighteen hours.

"Look yonder." I pointed through the window at the hangar bay, a wide berth within the barrel-shaped main hull just forward of the railgun. Its

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doors were open, and as the *Comet* slowly cruised past we could see the gig and service pods parked in their cradles. "Everything's there. Even the lifeboats are still in place."

Jeri angled the camera on the outrigger telemetry boom until it peered into the bay. Her wide eyes narrowed as she studied a close-up view on a flatscreen. "That's weird," she murmured. "Why would they depressurize the bay and open the doors if they didn't. . . ?"

"Knock it off, you two!"

McKinnon was strapped in his chair, on the other side of Jeri Lee's duty station from mine. "It doesn't matter why they did it. Just keep your eyes peeled for pirates . . . they could be lurking somewhere nearby."

I chose to remain silent as I piloted the *Comet* past the mass-driver's massive anchor-arms and over the top of the asteroid. Ever since McKinnon had returned to the bridge an hour ago—following the shower and leisurely breakfast I myself had been denied—he had been riding his favorite hobby horse: asteroid pirates had seized control of the *Fool's Gold* and taken its crew hostage.

This despite the fact that we had not spotted any other spacecraft during our long journey and that none could now be seen in the vicinity of the asteroid. It could also be logically argued that the four-person crew of a prospector ship would have a hard time overcoming the twelve-person crew of a mass-driver, but logic meant little to Captain Future. His left hand rested on the console near the EMP controls, itching to launch a nuke at the pirate ship he was certain to find lurking in the asteroid's shadow.

Yet, when we completed a fly-by of 2046-Barr, none were to be found. In fact, nothing moved at all, save for the asteroid itself. . . .

A thought occurred to me. "Hey, Brain," I said aloud, "have you got a fix on the mass-driver's position and bearing?"

"Affirmative, Mr. Furland. It is X-ray one-seven-six, Yankee two . . ."

"Mr. Furland!" McKinnon snapped. "I didn't give orders for you to . . ."

I ignored him. "Skip the numbers, Brain. Just tell me if it's still on course for cislunar rendezvous."

A momentary pause, then: *"Negative, Mr. Furland. The* Fool's Gold *has altered its trajectory. According to my calculations, there is a seventy-two-point-one probability that it is now on collision course with the planet Mars."*

Jeri went pale as she sucked in her breath, and even McKinnon managed to shut up. "Show it to me on the tank," I said as I turned my chair around to face the nav table.

The tank lit, displaying a holographic diagram of the *Fool's Gold*'s present position in relationship with the Martian sidereal-hour. Mars still lay half an A.U. away, but as The Brain traced a shallow-curving

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orange line through the belt, we saw that it neatly intercepted the red planet as it advanced on its orbit around the Sun.

The Brain translated the math it had displayed in a box next to the three-dimensional grid. *"Assuming that its present delta-vee remains unchecked, in two hundred and thirty-six hours, twelve minutes, and twenty-four seconds, 2046-Barr will collide with Mars."*

I did some arithmetic in my head. "That's about ten days from now."

"Nine-point-eight three Earth standard days, to be exact." The Brain expanded the image of Mars until it filled the tank; a bulls-eye appeared at a point just above the equator. *"Estimated point of impact will be approximately twelve degrees North by sixty-three degrees West, near the edge of the Lunae Planum."*

"Just north of Valles Marineris," Jeri said. "Oh God, Rohr, that's near . . ."

"I know." I didn't need a refresher course in planetary geography. The impact point was in the low plains above Mariner Valley, only a few hundred klicks northeast of Arsia Station, not to mention closer to the smaller settlements scattered around the vast canyon system. For all I knew, there could now be a small mining town on the Lunae Planum itself; Mars was being colonized so quickly these days, it was hard to keep track of where a bunch of its one and half million inhabitants decided to pitch claims and call themselves New Chattanooga or whatever.

"Sabotage!" McKinnon yelled. He unbuckled his harness and pushed himself closer to the nav table, where he stared at the holo. "Someone has sabotaged the mass-driver so that it'll collide with Mars! Do you realize . . . ?"

"Shut up, Captain." I didn't need his histrionics to tell me what would occur if . . . *when* . . . 2046-Barr came down in the middle of the Lunae Planum.

The Martian ecosystem wasn't as fragile as Earth's. Indeed, it was much more volatile, as the attempt in the '50s to terraform the planet and make the climate more stable had ultimately proved. However, the Mars colonists who still remained after the boondoggle had come to depend upon its seasonal patterns in order to grow crops, maintain solar farms, continue mining operations and other activities which insured their basic survival.

It was a very tenuous sort of existence that relied upon conservative prediction of climatic changes. The impact of a three-kilometer asteroid in the equatorial region would throw all that straight into the compost toilet. Localized quakes and duststorms would only be the beginning; two or three hundred people might be killed outright, but the worst would be yet to come. The amount of dust that would be raised into the atmosphere by the collision would blot out the sky for months on end, causing global temperatures to drop from Olympus Mons to the Hellas

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Plantia. As a result, everything from agriculture and power supplies would be affected, to put it mildly, with starvation in the cold and dark awaiting most of the survivors.

It wasn't quite doomsday. A few isolated settlements might get by with the aid of emergency relief efforts from Earth. But as the major colony world of humankind, Mars would cease to exist.

McKinnon was still transfixed upon the holo tank, jabbing his finger at Mars while raving about saboteurs and space pirates and God knows what else, when I turned back to Jeri. She had taken the helm in my absence, and as the *Comet* came up on the *Fool's Gold* again, I closely studied the mass-driver on the flatscreens.

"Okay," I said quietly. "The hangar bay is out . . . we can't send the skiff in there while it's depressurized and the cradles are full. Maybe if we . . ."

She was way ahead of me. "There's an auxiliary docking collar here," she said, pointing to a port on the spar leading to the command sphere. "It'll be tight, but I think we can squeeze us in there."

I looked at the screen. Tight indeed. Despite the fact that the *Comet* had a universal docking adapter, the freighter wasn't designed for mating with a craft as large as *Fool's Gold*. "That's cutting it close," I said. "If we can collapse the telemetry boom, though, we might be able to make it."

She nodded. "We can do that, no problem . . . except it means losing contact with Ceres."

"But if we don't hard-dock," I replied, "then someone's got to go EVA and try entering a service airlock."

Knowing that this someone would probably be me, I didn't much relish the idea. An untethered spacewalk between two vessels under acceleration is an iffy business at best. On the other hand, cutting off our radio link with Ceres under these circumstances was probably not a good idea. If we fucked up in some major way, then no one at Ceres Station would be informed of the situation, and early warning from Ceres to Arsia Station might save a few lives, if evacuation of settlements near Lunae Planum was started soon enough.

I made up my mind. "We'll hard-dock," I said, turning in my seat toward the communications console, "but first we send a squib to Ceres, let them know what's . . ."

"Hey! What are you two doing?"

Captain Future had finally decided to see what the Futuremen were doing behind his back. He kicked off the nav table and pushed over to us, grabbing the backs of our chairs with one hand each to hover over us. "I haven't issued any orders, and nothing is done on my ship without my . . ."

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"Bo, have you been listing to what we've been saying?" Jeri's expression was carefully neutral as she stared up at him. "Have you heard a word either Rohr or I have said?"

"Of course I . . . !"

"Then you know that this is the only recourse," she said, still speaking calmly. "If we don't hard-dock with the *Gold,* then we won't have a chance of shutting down the railgun or averting its course."

"But the pirates. They might . . . !"

I sighed. "Look, get it through your head. There's no . . ."

"Rohr," she interrupted, casting me a stern look that shut me up. When I dummied up once more, she transfixed McKinnon again with her wide blue eyes. "If there are pirates aboard the *Gold,*" she said patiently, "we'll find them. But right now, this isn't something we can solve by firing missiles. Rohr's right. First, we send a squib to Ceres, let them know what's going on. Then . . ."

"I know that!"

"Then, we have to dock with . . ."

"I know that! I know that!" His greasy hair scattered in all directions as he shook his head in frustration. "But I didn't . . . I didn't give the orders and . . ."

He stopped, sullenly glaring at me with inchoate rage, and I suddenly realized the true reason for his anger. McKinnon's subordinate second officer, whom he had harassed and chastised constantly for three weeks, had become uppity by reaching a solution that had evaded him. Worse yet, the second officer had done it with the cooperation of the Captain's first officer, who had tacitly agreed him on all previous occasions.

Yet this wasn't a trifling matter such as checking the primary fuel pump or cleaning the galley. Countless lives were at stake, time was running out, and while he was spewing obvious nonsense about space pirates, Mister Furland was trying to take command of his ship.

Had I a taser conveniently tucked in my belt, I would have settled the argument by giving him a few volts and strapping his dead ass in his precious chair, thereby allowing Jeri Lee and me to continue our work unfettered. But since outright mutiny runs against my grain, compromise was my only weapon now.

"Begging your pardon, Captain," I said. "You're quite right. You haven't issued orders, and I apologize."

Then I turned around in my chair, folded my hands in my lap, and waited.

McKinnon sucked in his breath. He stared through the windows at the *Fool's Gold,* looked over his shoulder once more at the holo tank, weighing the few options available against the mass of his ego. After too many wasted seconds, he finally reached a decision.

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"Very well," he said. He let go of our chairs and shoved himself back to his accustomed seat. "Ms. Bose, prepare to dock with the *Fool's Gold*. Mr. Furland, ready the main airlock hatch and prepare to go EVA."

"Aye, sir," Jeri said.

"Um, yeah . . . aye, sir."

"Meanwhile, I'll send a message to Ceres Station and inform them of the situation before we lose contact." Satisfied that he had reached a proper decision, he laid his hands on the armrest. "Good work, Futuremen," he added. "You've done well."

"Thank you, Captain," Jeri said.

"Aye, sir. Thank you." I unbuckled my seat harness and pushed off toward the bridge hatch, trying hard not to smile.

A little victory. Insignificant as it then seemed, I didn't have any idea how much my life depended upon it.

> *He took the pilot chair and headed the* Comet *across the zone toward the computed position of the invisible asteroid.*
>
> *"They'll surely see us approaching!" Ezra warned. "The Magician of Mars will be taking no chances, Cap'n Future!"*
>
> *"We're going to use a stratagem to get onto that asteroid without him suspecting," Curt informed. "Watch."*
>
> —Ibid; *The Magician of Mars* (1941)

I'm a creature of habit, at least when it comes to established safety procedures, and so it was out of habit that I donned an EVA suit before I cycled through the *Comet*'s airlock and entered the *Fool's Gold*.

On one hand, wearing the bulky spacesuit within a pressurized spacecraft is stupidly redundant, and the panel within the airlock told me that there was positive pressure on the other side of the hatch. Yet it could be argued the airlock sensors might be out of whack and there was nothing but hard vacuum within the spar; this has been known to happen before, albeit rarely, and people have died as a result. In any case, the *Astronaut's General Handbook* says that an EVA suit should be worn when boarding another craft under uncertain conditions, and so I followed the book.

Doing so saved my life.

I went alone, leaving Jeri and McKinnon behind inside the freighter. The hatch led past the *Gold*'s airlock into the spar's access tunnel, all of which was vacant. Switching on the helmet's external mike, I heard nothing but the customary background hum of the ventilation system, further evidence that the vessel crew compartments were still pressurized.

At that point, I could well have removed my helmet and hung it from

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a strap on my utility belt. In fact, the only reason I didn't was that I didn't want it banging around as I went through the carrousel, which lay at the end of the tunnel to my right. Besides, the stillness of the tunnel gave me the chills. Surely someone would have noticed the unscheduled docking of an Ares-class freighter, let alone one so far from Ceres. Why wasn't there an officer waiting at the airlock to chew me out for risking collision with his precious ship?

The answer came after I rotated through the carrousel and entered the rotating command sphere. That's when I found the first corpse.

A naked man hung upside down through an open manhole, his limp arms dangling above the wide pool of blood on the deck. It was difficult to see his face, because the blood that had dyed it crimson came from a scimitar-shaped gash in his neck. Looking up through the manhole, I saw that his feet had been neatly lashed together with a bungee cord, which in turn was tied to a conduit in the ceiling of the corridor directly above.

Since there were no bloodstains below his shoulders, it was obvious that his throat had been slit after he had been hung from the conduit. The blood was dry—most of it, anyway—and the body was stiff. He had been here for quite some time.

I reported what I found to Jeri and McKinnon, and then I gingerly pushed the body out of the way and continued down the corridor.

Please understand if everything I tell you sounds coldly methodical, even callous. First, if you've worked in space as long as I have—that is, all my life—then death, no matter how horrible it may be, is no stranger. The first time I saw a man die was when I was nine years old, when a one-in-a-million micrometeorite punched through the helmet faceplate of one of my school teachers while he was leading us on a field trip to the Apollo 17 landing site at Taurus Lithrow. Since then, I've seen the grisly results of explosive decompression, fatal radiation overexposure, freak mining accidents, careless suit-up procedures, hull fires and electrocutions, even someone who choked on his own vomit after consuming too much bathtub vodka during a birthday party. Death comes to us all, eventually; if you're careful and wise, all you can do is make sure that it isn't too painful and no one is stuck with a mess to clean up.

Second: if I attempted now to describe each and every body I discovered as I made my way through the *Fool's Gold*, not only would the result be gratuitous pandering to those who wallow in such details, but I would never be able to complete this testimony.

To put it succinctly, the command sphere of the *Fool's Gold* was a slaughterhouse.

I found ten more bodies, each more gruesome than the last. They were in crew cabins and passageways, in the galley and in the head, in the rec room and the quartermaster's office.

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Most were alone, but two of them were together, each apparently dead from wounds they had inflicted upon one another: a man and a woman, who had tried to carve each other up with knives they had taken from the nearby galley.

A couple of the bodies were nude, like the first, but most were fully or partially clothed. For the most part, they had died of stabbing or bludgeon wounds, by means of anything that could be used as a weapon, whether it be a ballpoint pen, a screwdriver, or a pipefitter's wrench.

One woman was lucky. She had committed suicide by hanging herself by a coiled bedsheet she had cast over the top of a door. I hope that she had successfully strangled herself before whoever found her body seared off her right arm with the cutting torch cast nearby.

As I climbed up ladders, poked my helmet through hatches, and stepped over stiffening corpses, I kept up a running monologue, informing the *Comet* of where I exactly was within the vessel and what I had just found. I made no speculation as to why this massacre had taken place, only to note that the bodies seemed reasonably fresh and that most of the bloodstains were dry.

And blood lay everywhere. It was splattered across walls and soaked into carpets and dripping from wall fixtures, until it no longer resembled blood and just looked like spilled red paint. I was glad I had my helmet on, because the visor helped distance me from the carnage, and the rank odor would have made me even more sickened than I was now.

Although I heard an occasional gasp or exclamation from Jeri through my headset, after awhile I couldn't detect McKinnon's voice any longer. I assumed that he had gone someplace private to vomit. This was understandable; the violence around me was mind shattering.

There were four decks in the command sphere, one above the other. By the time I reached the top deck, I had counted eleven corpses. Remembering that McKinnon had told me earlier that the crew complement of the *Fool's Gold* was twelve, I had begun to wonder where the last body lay.

The hatch leading to the bridge was sealed shut; I used the laser welding torch from my belt to cut the lock. When I grasped the lockwheel and prized it open, it made a faint grinding noise, and it was at that moment that I heard a methodical, almost rhythmic thumping, as if something were being beaten against a bulkhead.

I first thought it was another background noise from the vessel itself, but when I pushed the hatch farther open, the noise it made interrupted the rhythm.

I stopped, holding the hatch ajar as I listened intently. I heard a faint giggle, then the thumping sound recommenced.

Someone was alive within the bridge.

The command center was dimly lit, the fluorescents switched off; the

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only light came from computer displays, flatscreens, and multicolored switches. The deck was in ruins, as if there had been a blowout, although the external pressure gauge told me it was still pressurized: upended chairs, ripped logbooks and manuals strewn across the floor, the remains of a bloody shirt.

The thumping continued. Seeking its unseen source, I switched on the helmet lamp and walked within its beam, my eyes darting back and forth as I searched for the sole survivor of the *Fool's Gold*. I was halfway across the bridge when my eye caught something scrawled across a bulkhead. Two words, fingerpainted in blood across the gray surface:

PLAGUE
TITAN

It was then that I knew that wearing an EVA suit had saved my life.

Trembling with its insulated layers, I crossed the deserted bridge, looking for the last remaining crewmember of the *Fool's Gold*.

I found him in the emergency airlock, huddled in a corner next to the hatch, his knees drawn up to his chin. The jumpsuit he wore was streaked with gore, but I could still make out the captain's stars on its epaulets. His wary eyes winced from the glare of my lamp, and he giggled like a small child who had been caught exploring his mother's dresser drawers.

And then he continued to beat at the deck with the severed human arm he grasped in his left hand.

I don't know how long I stared at him. A few seconds, several minutes, perhaps longer. Jeri was saying something I couldn't understand; I paid no attention, nor could I respond. It wasn't until I heard another noise—from behind me, the faint sound of the hatch being shoved open—that I tore my eyes away from the mad captain of the *Fool's Gold*.

Bo McKinnon.

He had followed me from the *Comet*.

And, like the idiot he was, he wasn't wearing an EVA suit.

The little teardrop ship, the Comet, *blasted at top speed toward the Earth and its summoning call. Captain Future thought somberly of the many times he had answered that call. Each time, he and the Futuremen had found themselves called on to battle deadly perils. Was it to be the same this time?*

"We can't always win," he thought grimly. "We've been lucky, but the law of averages eventually has to turn against us."

—Ibid; *The Triumph of Captain Future* (1940)

Despite the name, no one knows the exact origin of the Titan Plague. It was first contracted by members of the *Hershel Explorer* expedition

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of 2069, during the Pax's ill-fated attempt to establish a research outpost on Titan. Although it was later theorized that the virus was indigenous to Titan itself, the fact that it thrived in an oxygen-nitrogen environment led many people to speculate that the Plague had originated somewhere other than Titan's nitrogen-methane atmosphere. There was even hearsay that the expedition had encountered an extrasolar race on Titan and that the Plague had been passed from Them . . . but, of course, that was just rumor.

Regardless, the indisputable facts are these: by the time the PARN *Hershel Explorer* returned to the inner system, the majority of its crew had been driven insane by an airborne virus. The only reason why the three surviving expedition members, including the ship's commander, were not infected was that they had managed to seal themselves within the command center, where they survived on emergency oxygen supplies and carefully rationed food and water. Most of the unquarantined members butchered each other during the long voyage home; those who did not died in agony when the disease rotted their brains in its terminal stages.

Once the *Hershel Explorer* reached the asteroid belt, the survivors parked it in orbit around Vesta, then used a lifeboat to escape. Three months later, the *Hershel Explorer* was scuttled by the PARN *Intrepid*. By then, Queen Macedonia had decreed that no further expeditions would be sent to Titan and that any vessels attempting to land there would be destroyed by Her Majesty's navy.

Despite the precautions, though, there had been a few isolated outbreaks of Titan Plague, albeit rare and confined to colonies in the outer system. No one knew exactly how the disease spread from the *Hershel Explorer*, although it was believed that it had been carried by the survivors themselves despite rigorous decontamination. Even though the first symptoms resembled little more than the once-common cold, the homicidal dementia that quickly followed was unmistakable. When someone came down with the Plague, there was no other option than to isolate them, remove anything that could be used as a weapon, and wait until they died.

No cure had ever been found.

Somehow, in some way we would never know, the Plague had found its way aboard the *Fool's Gold*. In the close confines of the mass-driver, it had swept through the entire vessel, driving its crew insane before they realized what had hit them. Perhaps the captain had figured it out, yet despite his precautions he himself was infected.

I was safe because I had worn a spacesuit while exploring the ship.

But Bo McKinnon . . .

Captain Future, Man of Tomorrow, dauntless hero of the spaceways.

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In his search for adventure, McKinnon had recklessly entered the vessel without bothering to don a suit.

"Did you shut the airlock?" I snapped.

"What? Huh?" Pale, visibly shaken by the horrors he had seen, McKinnon was staring at the maniac crouched in the airlock behind us. "Airlock? What . . . which . . . ?"

I grabbed his shoulders and shook him so hard his headset fell down around his neck. "The *Comet* airlock! Did you shut it behind you, or did you leave it open?"

Unable to hear me now, he stammered until he realized that his headset was ajar. He fumbled with it until the earphones were back in place. "The airlock? I think so, I . . ."

"I think so? You moron, did you . . . ?"

"Furland, oh my God . . ." He gaped at the wreckage around him. "What happened to these people? Did they . . . watch out!"

I turned around just in time to catch a glimpse of the madman as he lurched to his feet. Howling at the top of his lungs, he charged toward us, flailing the severed arm like a cricket bat.

I threw McKinnon aside. As he sprawled across the deck, I grabbed the airlock hatch and shoved it closed. An instant later the creature hit the opposite side of the hatch. He almost banged it open, but I put my shoulder against it. The hatch held, and a twist of lockwheel sealed it airtight; nonetheless, I could feel dull vibrations as the madman hammered against it with his hideous trophy.

I couldn't keep him locked in there forever. Sooner or later, he would find the lockwheel and remember how it worked. Perhaps then I could overcome him—if I was lucky, considering his berserk rage—but even then, I didn't dare bring him aboard the *Comet*.

There was only one solution. I found the airlock's outer control panel and flipped open its cover. "I'm sorry, sir," I whispered to the lunatic. "May God have mercy on us both."

Then I pushed the switch that jettisoned the outer hatch.

The alarm bells that rang throughout the bridge were the poor man's funeral dirge. There was long silence after I shut off the alarms, finally broken by McKinnon's voice.

"Mr. Furland, you just murdered that man."

I turned back around. McKinnon had managed to struggle to his feet; he clutched the back of a chair for support, and he glared at me with outraged eyes.

Before I could respond, Jeri's voice came to me over the comlink: *"Rohr, he shut the airlock on the way out. The* Comet *hasn't been infected."*

I let out my breath. For once, Bo had managed to do something right on his own. "Good deal, kiddo. Keep it shut until I come back aboard."

I stepped away from the airlock, heading for the helm station on the

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other side of the bridge. McKinnon planted himself in my path. "Did you hear me, Mr. Furland?" he demanded, his adam's apple bobbing beneath his beard. "You just killed a man . . . I saw you do it! You . . ."

"Don't remind me. Now get out of my way." I pushed him aside and marched toward the helm.

One of its flatscreens depicted a schematic chart of the asteroid's position and estimated course. As I suspected, someone aboard the mass-driver had deliberately laid in the new course during a fit of insanity. Probably the captain himself, considering the fact that he had locked himself in here.

"I'm placing you under arrest!" McKinnon yelled. "Under my jurisdiction as an agent of the Planet Police, I . . ."

"There's no such thing." I bent over the keypad and went to work accessing the main computer, my fingers thick and clumsy within the suit gloves. "No Planet Police, no asteroid pirates. Just a ship whose air ducts are crawling with the Plague. You're . . ."

"I'm Captain Future!"

The virus must have already affected him. I could have checked to see if he was displaying any of the flu-like symptoms that were supposed to be the Plague's first signs, but he was the least of my worries just now.

No matter what I did, I couldn't access the program for the central navigation system. Lack of a password that had probably died along with one of the damned souls aboard this ship, and none of the standard overrides or interfaces worked either. I was completely locked out, unable to alter the vessel's velocity or trajectory that had it propelling 2046-Barr straight toward Mars.

"And what are you talking about, not letting anyone aboard the *Comet* until you give the word?" McKinnon was no longer hovering over me; he had found the late captain's chair and had taken it as his own, as if assuming command of a vessel far larger than his measly freighter. "I'm the boss of this ship, not you, and I'm staying in charge until . . ."

Okay. The helm wouldn't obey any new instructions. Maybe it was still possible to scuttle the *Fool's Gold*. I accessed the engineering subsystem and began searching for a way to shut down the primary coolant loop of the gas-core reactor and its redundant safety systems. If I timed it right, perhaps the *Comet* would make a clean getaway before the reactor overloaded . . . and if we were goddamned lucky, the explosion might knock the asteroid sufficiently off-course.

"Rohr?" Jeri again. *"What's going on up there?"*

I didn't want to tell her, not with McKinnon eavesdropping on our comlink.

At the sound of her voice, he surged to his feet. "Joan! He's working for Ul Quorn, the Magician of Mars! He's going to . . . !"

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I heard him coming long before he reached me. I stood up and, pulling back my arm, landed a right hook square against his hairy jaw.

It stopped him, but it wouldn't keep him stopped. McKinnon was a big guy. He staggered back, his eyes unfocused as he groped at the chair for support. "Traitor," he mumbled, feeling at his mouth with his left hand. "You traitor, you . . ."

I didn't have time for this shit, so I punched him again, this time square in the nose. Second shot did the trick; he reeled backward, sagged against the chair, and flopped flat on his back.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

Even within the thick padding of my gloves, my knuckles hurt like hell. "Something that should have been done a long time ago," I murmured.

Cute line. I used up the last of my luck that way. I scrambled at the helm console for several more minutes before I submitted to the inevitable. Like the navigation controls, the engineering subsystem wouldn't obey my commands without the proper passwords. It was possible that they were written down somewhere, but I didn't have the time or inclination to go searching through the operations manuals, especially since most of them were strewn across the bridge like so much garbage.

We weren't out of options yet. There was still a final alternative, one which McKinnon himself had given us.

It was then that I knew that Captain Future had to die.

"Captain Future is dead!"

The rumbling voice of the big green Jovian space-sailor rose above the laughter and chatter and clink of goblets, in this crowded Venusopolis spacemen's cafe. He eyed his little knot of companions at the bar, as though challenging them to dispute him.

One of the hard-bitten spacemen, a swarthy little Mercurian, shook his head thoughtfully.

"I'm not so sure. It's true that the Futuremen have been missing for months. But they'd be a hard bunch to kill."

—Ibid; *Outlaws of the Moon* (1942)

As I write, I'm back on the Moon, occupying a corner table in Sloppy Joe's. It's almost closing time; the crowds have thinned out and the bartender has rung the bell for last call. He'll let me stay after he shuts the doors, though. Heroes never get booted out with the riff-raff, and there's been no shortage of free drinks ever since I returned from Ceres.

After all, I'm the last person to see Captain Future alive.

The news media helped us maintain our alibi. It was a story that had everything. Adventure, romance, blood and guts, countless lives at stake.

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Best of all, a noble act of self-sacrifice. It'll make a great vid. I sold the rights yesterday.

Because it's been so widely told, you already know how the story ends. Realizing that he had been fatally infected with Titan Plague, Bo McKinnon—excuse me, Captain Future—issued his final instructions as commanding officer of the TBSA *Comet*.

He told me to return to the ship, and once I was safely aboard, he ordered Jeri to cast off and get the *Comet* as far away as possible.

Realizing what he intended to do, we tried to talk him out of it. Oh, and how we argued and pleaded with him, telling him that we could place him in biostasis until we returned to Earth, where doctors could attempt to save his life.

In the end, though, McKinnon simply cut off his comlink so that he could meet his end with dignity and grace.

Once the *Comet* was gone and safely out of range, Captain Future managed to instruct the mass-driver's main computer to overload the vessel reactors. While he sat alone in the abandoned bridge, waiting for the countdown, there was just enough time for him to transmit one final message of courage. . . .

Don't make me repeat it, please. It's bad enough that the Queen read it aloud during the memorial service, but now I understand that it's going to be inscribed upon the base of the twice-life size statue of McKinnon that's going to be erected at Arsia Station. Jeri did her best when she wrote it, but between you and me, I still think it's a complete crock.

Anyway, the thermonuclear blast not only obliterated the *Fool's Gold*, but it also sufficiently altered the trajectory of 2046. The asteroid came within five thousand kilometers of Mars; its close passage was recorded by the observatory on Phobos, and the settlements in the Central Meridian reported the largest meteor shower in the history of the colonies.

And now Bo McKinnon is remembered as Captain Future, one of the greatest heroes in the history of humankind.

It was the least Jeri could have done for him.

Considering what a jerk Bo had been all the way to the end, I could have tried to claim the credit, but her strong will persevered. I suppose she's right; it would look bad if it was known that McKinnon had gone out as a raving lunatic who had to be coldcocked by his second officer.

Likewise, no one has to know that four missiles launched from the *Comet* destroyed the mass-driver's main reactor, thus causing the explosion that averted 2046-Barr from its doomsday course. The empty weapon pod was jettisoned before the *Comet* reached Ceres, and the small bribe paid to a minor Pax bureaucrat insured that all records of it ever having been installed on the freighter were completely erased.

It hardly matters. In the end, everyone got what they wanted.

As first officer of the *Comet*, Jeri became its new commander. She

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offered me her old job, and since the *Jove Commerce* deal was down the tubes, I gratefully accepted. It wasn't long after that before she also offered to show me the rest of her tattoos, an invitation that I also accepted. Her clan still won't speak to her, especially since she now plans to marry a Primary, but at least her fellow Superiors have been forced to claim her as one of their own.

For now, life is good. There's money in the bank, we've shucked our black sheep status, and there's no shortage of companies who want to hire the legendary Futuremen of the TBSA *Comet*. Who knows? Once we get tired of working the belt, maybe we'll settle down and take a shot at beating the odds on this whole cross-breeding thing.

And Bo got what he wanted, even though he didn't live long enough to enjoy it. In doing so, perhaps humankind got what it needed.

There's only one thing that still bothers me.

When McKinnon went nuts aboard the *Fool's Gold* and tried to attack me, I assumed that he had come down with the Plague. This was a correct assumption; he had been infected the moment he had come through the airlock.

However, I later learned that it takes at least six hours for Titan Plague to fully incubate within a human being, and neither of us had been aboard the *Fool's Gold* for nearly half that long.

If McKinnon was crazy at the end, it wasn't because of the Plague. To this day, I have no idea what made him snap . . . unless he believed that I was trying to run off with his ship, his girl, and his goddamn glory.

Hell, maybe I was.

Last night, some nervous kid—a cargo grunt off some LEO freighter, his union card probably still uncreased—sidled up to me at the bar and asked for my autograph. While I was signing the inside cover of his logbook, he told me a strange rumor he had recently heard: Captain Future managed to escape from the *Fool's Gold* just before it blew. According to him, prospectors in the inner belt report spotting a gig on their screens, one whose pilot answers their calls as Curt Newton before transmissions are lost.

I bought the youngster a drink and told him the truth. Naturally, he refused to believe me, nor can I blame him.

Heroes are hard to find. We need to welcome them whenever they appear in our midst. You've just got to be careful to pick the right guy, because it's easy for someone to pretend to be what they're not.

Captain Future is dead.

Long live Captain Future. ●

—for the late Edmond Hamilton

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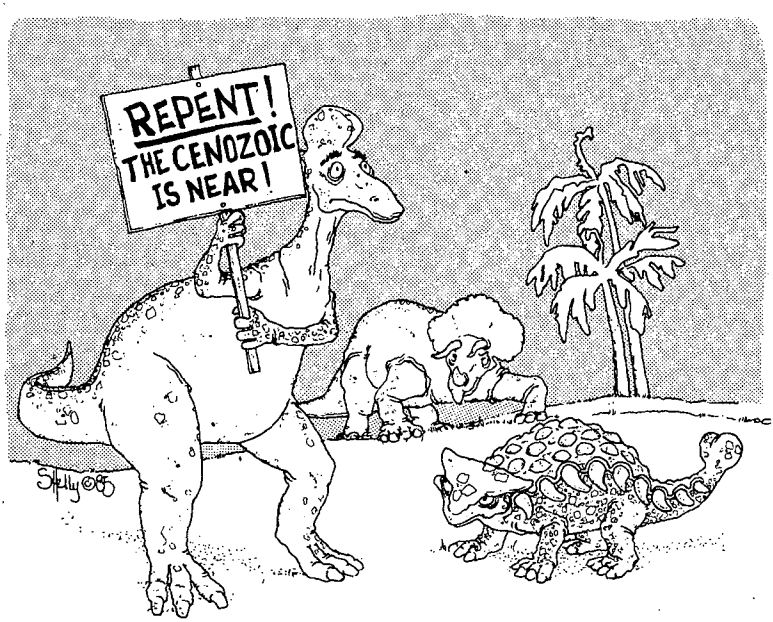
AUTHOR'S NOTE

Although largely forgotten today, Captain Future was a popular pulp-fiction character of the 1940s. Created by Better Publications editor Mort Weisinger during the 1939 World Science Fiction Convention, Curt Newton was featured in his own magazine for several years, and later in *Startling Stories*. Several Captain Future novels were reprinted in paperback in the late '60s; since then, however, the character has vanished into obscurity.

This story is dedicated to the late Edmond Hamilton, author of most of the Captain Future adventures. The quotes from the original Captain Future stories are reprinted by permission of Edmond Hamilton's literary estate, the author of most of the Captain Future adventures, and the state executor Eleanor Wood of the Spectrum Literary Agency.

The author wishes to thank Ms. Wood, Julius Schwartz, Forrest J. Ackerman, Sam Moskowitz, and Chuck Segal for their assistance.



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ON BOOKS

by Paul Di Filippo

Forgotten? Never Heard? Your Choice!

Up in Science Fiction Heaven, they've got a helluva backlist. Heinlein, Asimov, Herbert, Blish, Kuttner, Leiber, Simak —You name the Grand Master, and his stuff is easily available in that reader's paradise. Infinite copies in eternal editions, annotated, indexed and eagerly consumed by lucky former mortals and admiring angels alike.

Down here, of course, things are different. Down here, you have to hunt like a single-minded ferret for every tattered second-hand copy of *The Green Brain* (Herbert, 1966) or *The Werewolf Principle* (Simak, 1967). And definitive short stories, pivotal to the evolution of SF, are even harder to unearth, lost in moldering stacks of pulp.

All of which makes the appearance of Volume I of the Complete Stories of Theodore Sturgeon, *The Ultimate Egoist* (North Atlantic Books, PO Box 12327, Berkeley, CA 94712, $25.00, hardcover, 387 pages), an occasion to jump up and down and yell deep-lunged for raucous joy.

Masterminded by elvish popmeister Paul Williams, who was so instrumental in gathering the complete stories of Philip K. Dick together, this luxuriously produced book (with a gorgeous cover by Jacek Yerka), collects all of Sturgeon's short fiction from 1938 to late 1940. In it, you will watch one of the field's finest writers start to transform himself from a $5-a-trick, newspaper-syndicate "pen prostitute" into a master of gut-tugging, colorful, soul-snagging ten-page miracles.

Most of the stories here will be unfamiliar to most everyone. Sturgeon's legendary "first" story, "Ether Breather," doesn't pop up till page 148. Many of the early ones are facile and O. Henryish —just what his editors demanded. But all of them contain glints of greatness: closely observed people and scenery, twists of language, the quirky minutia of life. Also present are all of Sturgeon's fixations and themes in embryo: beautiful loving women, precocious kids, cats, wounded heroes, self-sacrifice, social ostracism, the artist's struggle with his material.

The two standout entries here are, of course, "Bianca's Hands" and "It." Both show Sturgeon at the top of his early form, working in a world where death can sometimes be a devoutly wished consumation (the strangulation of Ran by Bianca) and life can sometimes be a horrid curse (the amoral ferocity of the mold monster in "It").

Paul Williams's canny endnotes

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are full of literary and actual detective work, and serve as a mini-biography of Sturgeon's early years, as he struggles to earn his bread by writing, only to be forced by poverty to ship out on various lowlife freighters across the Western Hemisphere—his first wife-to-be loyally waiting at home.

If you care about—if you love—SF, you need this book.

Another way for good work to get lost, amidst the noise and hype generated by the latest mega-best-sellers, is for us all not to pay attention to the output of smaller presses, thus missing out on the new Sturgeons still struggling among us.

On hand this column are a brace of books too good to neglect, both from Brian Clark's Permeable Press, 47 Noe Street, Suite 4, San Francisco, CA 94114. First up is *Tonguing the Zeitgeist,* by Lance Olsen ($11.95, trade paper, 192 pages).

Beneath the strikingly bizarre cover of this book (a computer-enhanced photo of a man kissing a skull against a moire background) lies a tale equally outré, yet one clearly narrated and even central to the SF field. Olsen's story is your basic world-gone-to-pot dystopia with a cyberpunk edge, not unlike Marc Laidlaw's recent *Kalifornia* (1993). Yet Olsen's writing is so fluid and inventive, his pace so manic, his wit so sharp, that nothing seems stale and the action never sags.

On an Earth circa 2020, where all our current ills are multiplied a thousandfold (greenhouse effect, terrorism, epidemics), pop music still provides solace for the masses. But it's a sick, slick product, befitting the times, a geriatric case covered with scars, scabs and open wounds. How Ben Tendo, who plays in a band from the Spocoeur megapolis called Lithium Breed, eventually is coerced into "selling out" and becoming one of the manipulated "hyperstars" forms the meaty backbone of this tale.

But Olsen glories massively in his mordant background and the non-essential throwaway stuff fully as much as the mainline plot. Cutting among various gonzo-named subsidiary characters (Jerry Lewis-Foozebane, Lazar Pewee Zorilla), jumping across social strata and around the rotting globe, he shows us a world on the edge of complete collapse, where a blind humanity is eating, screwing and warring itself to extinction.

And yet, this is a hilarious book! If you enjoy vicious satire and can laugh through your tears. Olsen begs to be quoted at length, which I can't do here. Let me just share one random riff: a home decorating service called "the World Museum (whose motto was 'Now everything can be everywhere')."

Reading this book, I flashed variously on earlier works by Spinrad, Pynchon, Leyner, and Womack, whose names should serve to whet your appetite. Yet Olsen is seldom directly derivative, and succeeds eminently in wedging his wicked, warped, and sadly plausible world into our brains.

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Permeable's second offering is another winner. Daniel Pearlman's *The Final Dream and Other Fictions* ($14.95, trade paper, 260 pages) is a generous sampling of stories from such sources as *Amazing, Synergy,* and *Semiotext(e) SF,* as well as three previously unpublished ones. They exhibit a wide-ranging talent, comfortable and proficient with such diverse tales as the Bradburyish "The Ground Under Man" or the Barrington-Bayley-like "Another Brush With The Fuzz" or the La Fontaine-style fable "Flies." But most of the stories lie within a certain SF satiric tradition best exemplified by Robert Sheckley, Stanislaw Lem, and William Tenn (as astutely pointed out in the introduction by George Zebrowski).

Pearlman has a predilection for tackling the big issues of the late twentieth century in a bracingly zesty way. Overpopulation, ecological hypocrisy, authoritarianism, the clash of the traditions of the past with the demands of the future—all these and more come in for a savage skewering.

In "Taking From The Top" the elderly struggle to accumulate Social Value Points in order to beat the governmental Grim Reaper.

A traveling salesman's intelligent psycar functions as a censorious confidante in "From Here To Eternitape."

And the title story illuminates all too convincingly how willingly people will give up their rights even to dream for themselves, with what disastrous consequences.

Pearlman's world is full of prickly characters, their rough edges and bull-headed individuality putting them constantly at odds with society, and simultaneously endearing them to the reader. Especially notable are the variety of battling spouses and lovers. Pearlman sees the law of the jungle still operative under the veneer of civilization, and this applies to the jostlings for dominance among males and females in his world.

My favorite story here is one of the new ones, "What Rough Beast." In it, scientist Phil Warden gradually discovers the real reasons behind the growing millennial madness evident in the animal kingdom—and its relevance to humanity. The story is a bold conflation of myth, science, and sex, and I guarantee that after reading it you will never hear the news of another whale stranding or city coyote without wondering if Pearlman could be right.

When you add in such metafictional tales as "Megabride" and "A Mobius Trip" this volume assumes must-buy status.

A final sad victim of inexplicable readerly inattention and lack of interest that bodes ill for the field is the original anthology. Already this year, Silverberg's *Universe* and Yolen's *Xanadu* have gone down for the count. Now you can add to this list England's fine *New Worlds,* edited by David Garnett.

Looking at the final volume, *New Worlds 4* (Gollancz, £6.99, trade paper, 223 pages), one is hard-pressed to explain its lack of suc-

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cess. This is as tasty a collection of vivid, exciting stories as any in recent memory, with nary a clunker among them.

Graham Charnock's "Harringay" is reminiscent of Charles Sheffield's "Out of Copyright," save that the cloned greats in Charnock consist of a bunch of dissipated artists, Pale Prince of whom is a deadpan Andy Warhol.

Lisa Tuttle's "And the Poor Get Children" offers the first new twist on immortality I've seen in a while.

"Legitimate Targets" by Ian McDonald is a sensitive depiction of alien-human love.

A slightly old-fashioned "Nerves of Steel" by Garry Kilworth details a robot's fascination with the physical pain it can never know.

"Love in Backspace" by Barrington Bayley is my favorite, a wacked tale of obscene FTL travel.

Elizabeth Sourbut turns in an over-the-top bravura fable of male dominance in "The Last Phallic Symbol."

"The Fleshpots of Luna" by Matthew Dickens is a Pohlish "The Man Who Ate the World" satire.

"Starlight Dreamer" by Peter Hamilton is elegant elfpunk.

"Free States" is an excerpt from Michael Moorcock's new novel, for more on which see further along in this column.

Closing out the volume is the superb "The Charisma Trees" by Robert Holdstock, an ingenious blending of bioengineering and metaphysics.

Supplementing the stories are keenly perceptive editorials by Garnett and Moorcock, and a witty dissection of some recent SF novels by mainstream writers, contributed by the irrepressible (and who would want to?) David Langford.

Previous volumes of *New Worlds* have been distributed here in the US. Make your local bookstore stock this, get your friends to buy a zillion copies, and perhaps Gollancz will reconsider future volumes.

Romeo and Juliet Among the Stars

The Space Opera mode has always had something of the Soap Opera about it. Why else would the transferred label have rung so true and stuck so long? Dashing deeds among the spaceways are hardly complete without estranged lovers to pine over and internecine family squabbles for power. The course of true love ne'er escapes a collision in the Asteroid Belt. A recent apotheosis was Joan Vinge's *The Snow Queen* (1980), but the most cursory survey starting back with Jack Williamson and extending through Edmond Hamilton, Gordon Dickson, and even Samuel Delany will illuminate the links between Fabio and Han Solo.

The latest exemplar of this revered romantic strain in SF is Catherine Asaro's *Primary Inversion* (Tor, $21.95, hardcover, 317 pages). A first novel, it's a pleasurable confection with a smattering of faults.

A deft opening sequence plunges

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us into Asaro's milieu. The galaxy is dominated by three empires, all human. The Allied worlds center on Earth, a latecomer to the scene even though they've been in space for two centuries. Preceding them were the Traders and the Skolians, humans whose ancestors were stolen from Earth five thousand years ago and hence took a different path. Our protagonist is Sauscony Valdoria, a space fighter pilot who also happens to be a potential heir to the Skolian empire. Narrated in the first person, her story is the classic tale of someone isolated by privilege and repressed by duties finally deciding that individual happiness is paramount and must be won. Unfortunately for Sauscony, her happiness is tied up with that of her one true soulmate, Jaibriol Qoz, her counterpart among the Skolians' deadly enemies, the Traders.

The script is now clear: balancing divided loyalties, swinging between desire to surrender and to fight, Sauscony will have to make tough decisions and gamble the fates of both empires to seek personal satisfaction.

Curiously, this makes for a surprisingly static story. The first fifty pages or so are clogged with explanatory flashbacks. An exciting raid on Jaibriol's palace and a stellar dogfight follow; then the rest of the book is basically a lot of moral introspection and psychoanalysis interspersed with family politics. Asaro has some interesting speculations on FTL drives and tech-augmented psionics (capitalizing on scientist Roger Penrose's notion that the brain is a quantum device), but these would not be enough to sustain a whole book.

What does keep one reading is a sexual subtext which I'm not certain is entirely intentional. The Traders (and we only see male ones) are all compulsory sadists by genetic heritage, except for Jaibriol, who is half Rhon, Sauscony's pedigree. (And he's a handsome virgin to boot!) He represents the possibility of empathetic mind-melding during sex which Sauscony has never been able to experience (except for something similar once with one of her brothers, when they were both kids!).

Well, I think you can see that this is pretty florid—not to mention Freudian—stuff, and by the time the climactic union in Chapter 15—titled "Chains and Silk"—rolls around, the reader is fully primed to mount the dais holding Sauscony's silk-sheeted bed along with the star-crossed lovers.

The only major impediment to rollicking along with Asaro's romance is her occasionally betraying tin ear for names. "Sauscony" to me evokes only aerobics sneakers. The shortened form of "Skolian" is "Skol," chewing tobacco or drunken toast. And being compelled to address a computer named "Zabo" tends to undermine a life-or-death dogfight.

The Cruelty of a Woman

J. G. Ballard's last novel, *The*

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Kindness of Women (1991), was populated by a bevy of helpful women who offered genuine psychological and sexual solace to the bereaved protagonist Jim. In his latest book, *Rushing to Paradise* (Picador USA, $21.00, hardcover, 240 pages), Ballard reverses this scheme, giving us the tale of one deranged woman distributing her dangerous favors across a spectrum of unlucky men.

The woman is the fortyish Dr. Barbara Rafferty, an M.D. who has lost her license for performing several mercy killings. Dr. Barbara, as she prefers to be called, has now fixated on animal-rights and ecological activism as her new reason for being. Turning her attention to a small Pacific island where the activities of the French military are threatening an albatross colony, she mounts a small armada of ships and volunteers. Under the glare of world media, she succeeds in forcing the French out and establishing her own colony of humans on the island.

Pivotal to Dr. Barbara's success is sixteen-year-old Neil Dempsey, her assistant, eventual sexual plaything, and convenient media martyr; Neil's point of view in fact is the lens through which the hellish events of the novel are viewed. The boy is plainly a spiritual cousin to the autobiographical young Jim who figured in *Empire of the Sun* (1984).

Like Jim, he disturbedly worships the second sun of nuclear annihilation, and travels to Saint-Esprit island more in hopes of seeing a bomb test than out of any real devotion to the cause of saving animals. Part child, part man, Neil is simultaneously spellbound by Dr. Barbara, yet perhaps the only one who sees her dark side clearly.

Dr. Barbara's problem is that she remains a killing angel, at the core an egocentric monster who needs enemies and crises to truly flourish. After her victory over the departed French has paled, she begins to use her followers like chess pieces in an insane game. In Parts II and III of the novel, what began as an acid satire on witless nature-lovers, the gullibility of the public, and the lust for fame (all three motifs also to be found in Ballard's *Day of Creation* [1987]), devolves into a scenario that could best be described as Dr. Kevorkian-on-Gilligan's-Island-trying-to-build-Bisophere-II. Echoes of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), McEwan's *The Cement Garden* (1978), and Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) also resound.

But the pleasure of reading Ballard derives in large part from non-plot, aesthetic, almost subliminal play of metaphors and patterns. Lining up once more his obsessional tropes—drowned pilots, empty bunkers, warped time, accusing skies—and cloaking them in his immaculate, ultracool prose, Ballard, like one of his heroes, Salvador Dali, succeeds in limning the outlines of our contemporary world through the surrealistic scrim of his Atomic Age stagesets.

If there is a simple moral to be taken from such a typically multi-

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valent Ballard book, it is that man is no longer a part of nature in the same way that a bird or a fish is. Burdened by a cortex, lost without society, a man—a woman—can no longer fall back into the lap of nature. Even rational stewardship is probably impossible, due to all we have forgotten. When, by book's end, Dr. Barbara's attempt to build Utopia has resulted in complete carnage, it is the return of the French navy that signals hope.

In this respect, Ballard's work has changed dramatically since such books as *The Crystal World* (1966) and *The Drowned World* (1962), whose protagonists were sympathetically depicted noble madmen longing to merge with the superior alien landscapes. In the midst of the wreckage of the past thirty years, such avenues seem forever closed.

Wise Blood

Almost all of Michael Moorcock's work dovetails into a huge and impressive edifice of mind-boggling complexity. In his Multiverse, characters cross continua with abandon, donning and dropping masks, changing their genders, dying, being resurrected, smiling ruefully with world-weary panache throughout innumerable creation-and-destruction cycles of the plenum. Like Philip José Farmer or James Branch Cabell, Moorcock produces intertwining tales that, however satisfying and enthralling in their own right, acquire deeper significance when slotted into their overarching framework.

His latest novel, *Blood* (Millennium, £9.99, trade paper, 247 pages), is the most recent exotically glazed brick in the wall of this titanic structure. Advance publicity claims that this book (along with two links yet to come, *Fabulous Harbours* and *The War Amongst the Angels*) represents a "culmination of [Moorcock's] ideas and themes." Perhaps, perhaps. *Blood* does possess a different tenor from much of the saga: the sense of futility and doom that weighs down, say, an Elric, has been modified here by a palpable air of hope. Why, the final chapter is even titled "The Moral Multiverse." But many of the machinations and personas of the larger players in this endless Game of Time will seem very familiar to any readers of Moorcock's earlier books—not in itself a hinderance to enjoyment.

Like many of the volumes in this megaseries, *Blood* follows a certain pattern. The reader is initially plunged into a universe analogous on some level to ours, which seems whole and self-sufficient. Gradually, figures and forces from a higher plane begin to intrude, revealing the real scale of affairs, which tend to culminate in a fruitful apocalypse.

The small world Moorcock focuses on here is a unique and vibrant creation. On a timeline where Africa is predominant and whites are a degenerate and despised minority, the South of America is a black-ruled melange

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of planters, riverboats, gamblers, and white slaves. Compounding this strangeness is a different set of physics, one which taps floating spots of "color" for power. Unfortunately arrogant mankind, by drilling too deep for more and more color, has created the Biloxi Fault, a flaw in spacetime that has dangerously warped the fabric of this world.

Supreme in this society are the professional gamblers, or jugadors (the prose here is a beguiling mix of English, Arabic, Spanish, and French, a kind of Cosmic Cajun). Two of the most famous are Jack Karaquazian (note the family resonance with Jerry Cornelius) and Sam Oakenhurst. Bound by their chivalry and codes of honor, they travel from the Terminal Cafe on the edge of the Fault up and down the Mississippi, brawling, loving, and playing their Borgesian games, "games of such complexity and subtle creativity, using the most exquisitely delicate electronics (or more recently pseudo-electronics) to create realities whose responsibilities and mathematics sometimes terrified even the most experienced of gamblers."

This training unwittingly hones Jack and Sam for moving on up to the Second Ether, where the *Zeitsjuego* between the forces of Chaos and the stifling Singularity is waged. (Amusingly, the Second Ether figures in their own world as a kind of pulp serial that happens to be true!) Soon, they are recruited by the exotic Rose von Bek and embark on an attempt to refashion the multiverse to incorporate love and justice, while Jack also continues his Orphic search for his lost love, the female jugador Colinda Dovero.

Moorcock succeeds admirably in creating a romping tall-tale atmosphere for the early parts of his book. At times he captures the kind of off-kilter description and dialogue beloved by Lafferty. At other times, he reminds me of Ishmael Reed in his *Yellow-Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969), with a tinge of William Burroughs. The mix is potent, heady and unlike anything else you will have recently read.

Like Robert Silverberg, another journeyman-turned-artist, Moorcock has—by devotion and superhuman hard work in the SF quarries—honed his own skills to the point where he makes writing a novel seem more like a graceful fluid extrusion than any kind of work. In this, he resembles his own hero, Jack Karaquazian. With this iridescent book (which surely merits inclusion on Michael Swanwick's "hard fantasy" curriculum), Moorcock adds his bit to the side of creative Chaos.

Podkayne Plus

Fred Pohl's *Man Plus* (1976) stands up remarkably well after nearly twenty years of additional speculation and real-world events and advances. His tale of the secret government project to transform astronaut Roger Torraway into the

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first man able to live unprotected on the surface of Mars remains a compulsively readable mix of *realpolitik* and black humor, seeded with honest emotional depth-charges. Torraway is believably transformed from one of Pohl's patented psychologically unperceptive Everymen into a tragic, nonhuman figure akin to the protagonist of Simak's "Desertion," who is plainly his spiritual ancestor.

In focusing on pantropy (a useful term coined by James Blish to designate the retrofitting of humanity to their environment) as opposed to the currently more popular terraforming, Pohl explored an overlooked Mars-colonizing approach that strikes one as still fresh. With its occasional references to hackers and jacking in, as well as its subtly foreshadowed climax involving spontaneous AI's evolving out of "the net," this book is plainly a neglected proto-cyberpunk ancestor.

Despite being a competent, entertaining sequel, I doubt that anyone twenty years from now will be reading and saying the same about Thomas T. Thomas's *Mars Plus* (Baen Books, $20.00, hardcover, 342 pages). (Pohl is credited as coauthor, but I detect no sign of his style or themes or distinctive touches here, and so call this book Thomas's alone.)

It is forty years after the action of *Man Plus*. Several other cyborgs have been planted on Mars, as well as thousands of humans in flourishing colonies and some half-breeds called Creoles. The AI's that revealed themselves only to the reader at the end of the previous book still lurk in the net (now inexplicably called "the grid").

One of Pohl's original riffs involved a disintegrating political situation on Earth and how difficult it made any kind of large-scale projects. Thomas has followed this line to the point where there are now 1300 independent political entities on the globe. Despite this Balkanization, humanity has managed to erect several space-fountain transports and establish colonies throughout the solar system. Even given the aid of von Neumann devices, this development seems to stretch credulity somewhat. But if we put aside such pessimistic objections, we still run into a basic problem.

Thomas has tossed away everything that made the first book special and substituted weaker material. This is the exact same problem that P.M. Griffin had with her André Norton sequel, *Firehand* (1994), and exhibits the folly and near-impossibility of a later author extending the work of a pioneer.

Mars Plus begins promisingly enough with an update on Torraway's situation. His modifications and power supply are deteriorating, and he faces the task of getting help from the self-centered humans. Having set this situation up concisely and interestingly, Thomas throws it out the airlock. Instead, we are introduced to Demeter Coghlan, a ditzy young girl sent to Mars by the sovereign state of Texahoma as a spy. With her vacillation and inexperience, De-

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meter makes Heinlein's Podkayne look like Hillary Clinton. Unfortunately, she will remain centerstage for the rest of the book, involved in a lot of huggermugger about Martian independence, the greed of Earthlings and the aims of the lurking AIs, who seem to run exclusively on damaged Pentium chips. Torraway and his problems resurface briefly and without resolution from time to time.

Thomas is skilled enough to keep all his plates spinning giddily so that the book sustains a mild interest. His research into and understanding of technology, areology, and the practical side of maintaining a colony are excellent, up-to-date, and convincing. Information is inserted deftly, and speculations such as the artificial horseshoe-crab mining devices are intriguing. But any emotional resonance is missing, and bio-engineering is scanted in favor of new plans for terraforming.

The difference in titles between these two books says it all: from man to planet the focus shifts, with consequences all too predictable.

Adventures in the Dismal Trade

It may very well be that we do indeed live in a world that does *not* feature intercollegiate embalming competitions aimed at making the Funeral Bowl, giant Disneyland themepark cemetaries, and hordes of starstruck youngsters eager to become morticians. But you couldn't prove it by me, because I have not yet emerged from the spell cast by David Prill's *The Unnatural* (St. Martin's Press, $21.00, hardcover, 256 pages), where all these mordant institutions and others just as bizarre do exist.

In the sweet-tempered yet unflinchingly gross world created by Prill, embalming is a kind of high-profile combination of art, business, and sport—at least to its fans, who were raised on such pulps as *Undisturbed* and *Respectful Casket Tales*. Talent scouts for the big homes traverse the land, looking for up-and-coming novices who can be turned into master embalmers. And perhaps one of these newcomers will even succeed in beating The Record, that benchmark established in 1942 by Janus Mordecai, who prepared 1,769 corpses in an unsurpassed season.

Our hero in this warped, yet somehow totally believable milieu is young Andy Archway (think "Archie Andrews"), humble resident of Golbyville, Minnesota, self-taught embalming whiz. Taken up by scout Wake Wakefield, he is soon off to school on a scholarship, where he will perfect his skills. Unfortunately, however, all will not be a casket of roses for Andy, as he discovers ambition, treachery, grief, and finally, redemption.

What Prill has done is to take the beloved American Horatio Alger/Jack Armstrong myth and apply it to a subject most of us would rather avert our eyes from, thereby exposing how shallow and

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arbitrary our normal goals are, while also asking why we taboo certain areas of life.

But if Prill had merely followed the complete blueprint of the standard fable, his book would have been far less vital. Instead, he introduces many unexpected detours and anticlimaxes, rendering the arc of his narrative truer and more fascinating. For instance: seemingly set to break The Record in the famine-ridden country of Soma, Andy instead experiences catastrophe and an awakening that determines the rest of his life.

Prill is also generous with his satire, not limiting it to the funeral business. The book is filled with deft jabs at various American excesses. Reminding me of Jonathan Lethem's recent *Gun, With Occasional Music* (1994), *The Unnatural* manages to seduce the reader into applauding the macabre and investing his belief in the most unlikely scenarios.

If Terry Southern had ever collaborated with Edward Gorey, they might very well have come up with a book as sweetly perfumed with formaldehyde and rouged up as lifelike as *The Unnatural*.

Three Times Not Ours

What good are alternate histories, which of late have been enjoying a popular resurgence?

In my opinion, a lot—at their best.

If history is a science, then alternate histories are a historian's only means of experimentation. Akin to a physicist's otherwise impossible "thought experiments," they offer the possibility of establishing boundary conditions, charting likelihoods and—just possibly—gaining insights into any futures under similar circumstances. And since history is nothing without people, famous or otherwise, alternate histries offer a laboratory for character, a crucible of free will versus destiny. Finally, uchronias allow us to flirt with a calculus of human loss and gain. Is a world, say, where slave-labor still exists somehow plausibly redeemed by having less deadly pollution?

Three new novels offer us the chance to play this valuable game.

Simon Louvish's *The Resurrections* (Four Walls Eight Windows, $18.95, hardcover, 216 pages) employs a multitude of unique pivot points to bring its world into being. (All too often, authors rely on a single turning point, ignoring the interrelatedness of history.) The years of the action are 1967–1970. Quickly, we learn the ropes. The Nazis never came to power in Louvish's Germany. Instead, Hitler and a few followers fled to America. With Trotsky ruling a less aggressive Communist Russia, Mussolini running a fascist Italy with its focus on Africa, and an England holding tightly to its colonies, no World War Two—and no Holocaust—ever occurred. Instead, America waged the Pacific War against an isolated Japan, a war in which LA was atom-bombed first (by the kamikaze pilot Yukio

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Mishima!), followed by a retaliatory nuking of Tokyo.

These changes are merely the tip of the iceberg, however. Louvish is lavish with details regarding his imaginary timeline. As we jump across multiple first-person narrators (the most engagingly monstrous of whom is Joseph Goebbels himself, now resident in Las Vegas), a whole convincing political portrait of this world emerges. Wisely, Louvish has chosen not to examine his world during one of its more static decades, but during a time of upheaval (the "resurrections" of the title). Old leaders are dying, youth are rebelling, and new ways of being seem possible.

While Louvish's book is deep with consistent and interlocking political ramifications, it tends to scant the sociological, pop cultural aspects. There is no sense of inhabiting a foreign mediascape here, no new slang or fads or clothing. The one exception to this is so well done that one wishes Louvish had continued with more. Because Hollywood was taken out in the war, the British dominate films, using many exiled Italian directors. (Pasolini has never sold out, however, becoming Che Guevara's sometime documentary maker.) I know I'd sure like to see Fellini's epic *Los Angeles,* for one.

At the end of the novel, as Louvish's world is reeling from massive changes, one character, Rachel Levy, offers this insight into all "what if" speculations: "[H]owever the pieces move, the game remains the same, the basic choices and elements are unchanged: compassion or malice, generosity or greed, wisdom or stupidity, these are the human options. . . ."

Michael Conner's *Archangel* (Tor Books, $21.95, hardcover, 350 pages) offers an intriguing contrast to the Louvish title.

Whereas Louvish's book is packed with famous people and concentrates on international politics, Conner's fine and fascinating work is populated with a sturdy cast of sympathetic invented characters laboring to resolve their personal difficulties—that sometimes overlap with the larger ones of society—in a world where politics has regressed to the local level, and seems positively feudal at times.

The new Dark Ages began for Conner's people at the end of World War One, when the Germans unleashed a modified version of the notorious Ebola virus on the world. Known as Hun, the hemmoraghic plague soon reduced the world to a fraction of its former human (and mammal) population. With one telling exception, crucial to the survivors' reality: humans of African descent are immune, thanks to having been Darwinically winnowed already over the millennia.

Now it is the year 1930 in the small hamlet of Milltown, Minnesota, where immigrant blacks jockey with the remnants of the white power structure—including a tattered Klan—for control of the changing world. At an eerie clinic on the edge of town, the creepy doctor Simon Gray secretly conducts

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bizarre experiments toward a cure that attract the attention of the main protagonist, Danny Constantine, photographer and reporter for the local paper. Danny also happens to be chasing down a murderer who drains his victims of blood, vampire-fashion, and the tracks eventually lead to Gray —but I don't think you'll guess the exact denouement. And over all float the radio broadcasts of a mystery woman known as the Archangel, a kind of Man-in-the-High-Castle figure.

This book does many things well. It conveys the same archetypically stefnal feeling of a depopulated, dangerous globe found in George Stewart's *Earth Abides* (1949) and John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* (1951). It succeeds in replicating a real Jazz Age ambiance (although I believe that the phrase "knock yourself out" as Conner uses it is anachronistic), a time without antibiotics or television. (Suitable changes, of course, have occurred, such as the tendency for lonely survivors to form new pseudo-families in boarding houses.) It delivers a thrilling detective tale with a slambang climax. As an examination of the core racial prejudices that beset America, the book finds a strong voice in the principled but bitter black cop Dooley Willson. Finally, Conner slyly plays the uchronian game by inserting several references to the fates of Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway, and Scott Fitzgerald, among others.

Conner's style and pacing in this book are agreeably old-fashioned, in keeping with the period, yet never musty or tedious. Characters are inclined to deliver longish set-speeches at moments of high melodrama, but by the time these occur, the reader will be fully under the spell of this stirring, sad, yet somehow hopeful novel.

In *Reluctant Voyagers* (Bantam Spectra, $5.99, paper, 469 pages), Elisabeth Vonarburg has crafted a sensitive, moody and evocative hybrid of a book, reminscent both of John Crowley's *The Deep* (1975) and Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971). What begins as a fully fleshed alternate world tale slowly and startlingly evolves into a conceptual breakthrough novel sharing affinities with Gene Wolfe's *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* (1972).

At the start of the novel, we are in a world whose course diverged from ours at least two hundred years ago. The U.S. is divided into five linked Federations: the Lousiana, Western, Amerindian, Hispanic, and Eastern. Its neighbor, Canada, is similarly Balkanized. Here the subtle and mysterious action will unfold, mainly in the Enclave of Montreal and, later, in the mysterious Realm of the North, a land where the very laws of physics are different, and which hosts a mystical religion involving the Sleeping Deity and the two Infants, male and female, who must awake the slumbering demiurge.

Our focal character is Catherine Rhymer, professor of literature, divorced, fortyish, whose life is in something of a rut. Bound by rou-

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tine, she has only an assortment of strange dreams to enliven her nights and days. Little does she realize where these dreams will lead. As she becomes swept up in what seems to be mere political intrigue, like the hapless lead in a Hitchcock film, her dreams and visions escalate, revealing a much more shocking truth.

Catherine's world, it incontrovertibly emerges, is a rather shoddy subcreation, replete with bare patches that are revealed in surreal Dickian moments. She herself might very well be one of the amnesiac Voyagers of the title, a cross-dimensional traveler stranded here. The rather Borgesian doctrines espoused by the Northerners begin to seem more and more plausible: " 'A world exists . . . but it's incomplete. Influenced by other potentials, other manifestations of itself, its future state.' " Soon Catherine finds herself and a group of comrades drawn to the utmost North, where a layered revelation suggestive of a George MacDonald fantasy awaits.

Vonarburg's prose is sensual and measured, richly descriptive, especially in such domestic scenes as the death of Catherine's father. One of the attractions of uchronias is how they can present attractive worlds that are at once familiar and exotic, and Vonarburg's thick depiction makes her unique Canada seem like an alluring alternative to our world—at least until it begins to fray. (Full credit also accrues to translator Jane Brierly, who parsed the original French.)

If this novel is not in the running for the Dick Award for best paperback original of 1995, then we are all living on the wrong timeline. ●

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Hope you've been able to make plans for the WorldCon. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on clubs and fanzines, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 101 S. Whiting #700A, Alexandria VA 22304. The hot line is (703) 461-8645. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, with a musical keyboard—Erwin S. Strauss.

AUGUST 1995

18–20—**NecronomiCon.** For info, write: **Box 1320, Back Bay Annex, Boston MA 02117.** Or phone: **(703) 461-8645** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Danvers MA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Sheraton Tara. Guests will include: L. Sprague & Catherine Crook de Camp, Ramsey Campbell. The Cthulhu Mythos convention.

18–20—**San Diego Comic Convention. (619) 544-9555, (619) 544-0743 fax.** Convention Center, San Diego CA.

24–28—**Intersection. (+44 81) 522-1995.** Scottish Exhibition & Convention Centre, Glasgow Scotland, WorldCon.

26–27—**LanternCon. (701) 235-4329.** Holiday Inn, 13th Ave. S. & I-29, Fargo ND. Comics meet (daytime only).

27–Sep. 3—**Cruise Trek. (818) 597-2940.** Con on a cruise ship, sailing from Boston MA to Bermuda & back.

SEPTEMBER 1995

1–3—**ConGenial, c/o Rittenhouse, Box A3398, Chicago IL 60609. (708) 515-0234. E-mail: srittenh@mcs.com.** Relaxacon.

1–3—**PacifiCon, 1325 Stanley Ave. #2, Victoria BC V8S 3S4. (604) 595-8902.** Holiday Inn. J. DeLancie. Star Trek.

1–3—**Ballad Trek, 39 Hanover St., Asheville NC 28806. (704) 253-9981 or 298-7511.** Radisson. 350 fans in 1994.

1–4—**RiverCon, Box 58009, Louisville KY 40268. (502) 448-6562.** Executive West Hotel. Farmer, Offutt, Coulsons.

1–4—**OtaKon, 661-A Waupelani Dr., State College PA 16801. (814) 867-3478.** Penn State Scanticon. R. DeJesus.

2–3—**LanternCon, 520 Broadway, Fargo ND 58102. (701) 235-4329.** Radisson, Sioux Falls SD. Comics. Days only.

8–10—**CopperCon, Box 82303, Phoenix AZ 85071. (602) 973-2054.** Days Inn. M. R. Hildebrand, S. & J. Robinson.

8–10—**Mad Media, Box 9873, Madison WI 53715.** Holiday Inn South East. Media oriented. No more news for now.

9—**Trek Fest, Box 981701, Houston TX 77098. (713) 527-9277.** Medical Center. Holiday Inn. Grodenchik, Barr.

9–10—**LanternCon, 520 Broadway, Fargo ND 58102. (701) 235-4329.** DEC Center, Duluth MN. Comics. Days only.

15–17—**MosCon, Box 9622, Moscow ID 83843. (208) 882-3672.** University Inn, Pullman WA. Mel Gilden, P. Foglio.

15–17—**RavenCon, Box 17338, Richmond VA 23226. (804) 750-1902.** Sheraton Park South, W. Shetterly, E. Bull.

AUGUST 1996

29–Sep. 2—**LACon III, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409.** Hilton, Convention Center, Anaheim CA. WorldCon. $110.

AUGUST 1997

28–Sep. 1—**Lone Star Con 2, Box 27277, Austin TX 78755.** Marriotts, San Antonio TX. The 1997 WorldCon. $80.

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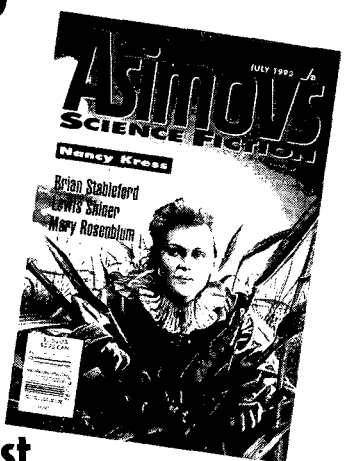

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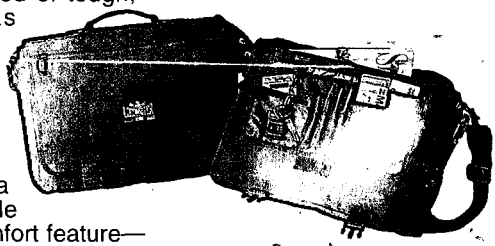

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